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Transcending fear and personal barriers: A narrative inquiry into the lived experience of skydiving

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the experience of skydiving and changes that occur in emotional and cognitive states as a skydiver progresses in skill from neophyte to intermediate level. The concept of experience is framed within John Dewey's notion of how experience relates to education. I utilize a first-person narrative inquiry approach to document my personal skydiving experiences and to explore the emotional states before, during and after a number of skydives throughout my career. A temporal landscape was used to illustrate the nature of emotional changes related to factors such as increased skill and experience. I utilize a process of 'unpacking' or retelling each story as a narrative method of analysis to aid the reader in establishing meaning from my experiences. I conclude that my emotional states before, during and after skydiving became more stable as I gained experience in the sport.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Narrative Beginnings

The idea for this research stemmed from a conversation with my supervisor regarding potential thesis topics. The notion that I could research and report on the sport that had very recently become a major passion for me was extremely appealing at a fundamental level. The need for this project struck me suddenly one day a few weeks later while I was searching the internet for documentary footage on skydiving. I discovered a documentary video on BASE[1] jumping, a similar but riskier sport in which participants jump from fixed objects, often at very low altitudes. This footage had been aired on the Australian version of "60 Minutes" on May 22nd, 2006. The opening words from this documentary were from BASE jumper Dan Whitford as he described the experience of stepping off a cliff:

As you leap off you cross over… from the world you know… to the world beyond. And it's a feeling which you cannot describe to anyone unless they have done it.

This statement from an insider was succinct yet powerful. It seemed to capture very eloquently what I had difficulty putting into words myself, acting as a catalyst for my thoughts and emotions. To this point in my skydiving career, every conversation I could remember with non-jumpers revealed the fact that the experience was difficult or impossible to understand for someone who had never done it. Reactions by others ranged from awe and wonder to utter disbelief that a rational person would willingly engage in such extreme behavior. As an insider, I began to hypothesize that a narrative inquiry could prove invaluable in enriching current understanding and

insight into the unique world of skydiving. The idea of writing first-person narratives on my own skydiving experiences began to take shape.

Social implications and relevance of the topic

Statistics show that participation in high risk sport and leisure activities has increased dramatically in recent years. For example, Jim Crouch, Director of Safety and Training for the United States Parachute Association, states that current membership has reached in excess of 31,000, compared with 20,000 in 1990 (personal communication, December 14, 2006). This trend is common in many other high risk activities, such as rock climbing, mountaineering, hang gliding, white water canoeing and kayaking, and ultra light piloting (Celsi, 1993).

In seeking to understand this increased rate of participation, researchers have studied motivation, emotional states and personality characteristics of high risk sport participants. Sociologists, such as Lyng (1990) and Laurendeau (2006) have revealed that the sport of skydiving is framed by a complex, highly stratified social structure which provides neophyte skydivers not only with guidance and direction, but with a subculture to which they may aspire to belong. Such analyses have revealed a complex layering of sociological and psychological factors that drive individuals to begin and continue in skydiving.

New knowledge and potential contributions to the sport of skydiving

A number of researchers (Lipscomb, 1999; Celsi, 1993; Laurendeau, 2006) are experienced skydivers. They have provided powerful and eloquent insights, as well as highly relevant contributions to the understanding of the subculture of skydiving. Their works on motivation, emotional changes and enculturation within

the skydiving community have been invaluable for increased understanding of this sport. Yet their works have been based on ethnographic reporting of the experiences of other skydivers. They have been constrained by their methodology to illustrate the experience of skydiving though the eyes and voices of others.

From a phenomenological point of view a narrative inquiry could add tremendous insight into the current understanding of high risk sport participation. This method of researching and reporting seems ideally suited to such an intense experience which is, indeed, difficult to describe to non participants. Furthermore, this highly personalized account would illuminate some of the motivational factors and emotional changes that a skydiver experiences, both during the course of a jump and over the passage of time that occurs as one gains experience.

Knowledge to be gained by the researcher

In addition to providing insight into the experience of skydiving, the first person narrative approach in this study will give the researcher opportunities to bring the experience to life in ways that cannot be accomplished through more traditional ethnographic research. The process of describing thoughts, perceptions and emotions will illuminate to the researcher and reader alike how various skydiving experiences can shape perception, both inside the skydiver's world and outside of it as well.

The research question

The purpose of this study was twofold; first, to gain a deeper understanding into the emotional states and changes experienced by a skydiver during a jump; second, to explore motivational and emotional changes that occur as one progresses

beyond the beginner stage to become a novice or intermediate skydiver. As a result of this research, the following questions were addressed:

From one skydiver's perspective, what psychological and/or social factors can be attributed to motivation in voluntary risk taking for sport? What emotions does one skydiver experience immediately before, during and after a jump? As one skydiver develops from beginner to intermediate status, do various psychological and social factors change? And finally, do the emotions linked to the activity of skydiving change as the participant skydiver gains experience?

Terms of the study

This study involved reporting thoughts and perceptions related to various experiences throughout my skydiving career. Initial training in the sport began approximately one and a half years prior to the conception of this study. In fact, by the conclusion of this project I was considered an intermediate skydiver as well as a coach and instructor. Therefore, a large number of events crucial to this project occurred in the past. For the purpose of comparison, data on past skydives were extracted from a variety of sources, including my skydiving log book, video records, tape recorded reflections and memory. This process of reflecting on past skydives was necessary to examine early perceptions and create a contrast between emotional states and motivation in the person as a neophyte jumper compared with him as an experienced one.

In terms of a chronological time frame, this study spanned over two and a half years. More importantly, it explored my skydiving career from the first jump to a point well after the one hundredth. The time frame beginning from my very first

skydive and progressing beyond my one-hundredth allowed for the examination of several distinct phases in skill development.

Chapter 2

Review of literature

The purpose of this literature review was to illustrate the importance of the proposed research, and to show the value of adding to current academic understanding of the experience of skydiving. In the first section, I created a context for the "experience" of skydiving by outlining the parameters of the term *experience*. In the second section, I discussed the problem of labeling in skydiving research, and why this creates a limiting and recurring paradigm in which researchers tend to distance themselves from the experience. I specified why a first person narrative representation has the potential to provide the reader with a much greater understanding of the sport. The third section discussed existing research on emotional states and emotional changes that take place during skydiving, and how these states tend to shift as a skydiver progresses in experience. The final section of this review provided a summary of the material discussed, highlighted gaps in the literature, and suggested areas for future study.

Working with a Deweyan view of experience

As this project is focused on deepening our understanding of the experience of skydiving, it is both necessary and useful to develop a context for the boundaries of experience. The relevant context for the term *experience* is based on the work of John Dewey (1938) and his analysis of experience as it relates to education. I will outline the major components of Dewey's theory of experience for future reference.

First, all learning takes place as a result of experience, but "not all experiences are genuinely or equally educative" (Dewey, 1938, p. 13). Every experience has both

a quality and an effect, and these components will determine the degree to which a person is impacted by the experience. Dewey uses several examples of the effects of experience to illustrate potential negative impacts. For instance, an experience may lead to callousness, insensitivity, lack of responsiveness or automatic habits which limit the possibilities for richer experiences in the future. A student may come to associate learning with boredom. In other words, the subjective quality of an experience may foster or inhibit future experiences, depending on whether it is perceived as positive or negative. Furthermore, he suggests that a series of disconnected experiences, even vivid, interesting ones, do little or nothing to facilitate learning, but rather tend to disperse the learner's attention and lead to a lack of both discipline and self control. However, experiences that are perceived as positive will be more likely to open the learner's mind towards new opportunities for learning and growth in the future.

Second, the phenomenon of experience operates on a principle of continuity. Specifically, there is a temporal quality in which "every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (Dewey, 1938, p. 27). Dewey's principle of continuity embodies not only physical, intellectual and moral growth, but also the direction and shape that growth takes depending upon the quality of an experience. The key is that experiences are categorized as either "educative or mis-educative", pointing to the degree to which an experience fosters or inhibits future growth in general. For example, a person following a particular stream of learning, whether it is learning to speak, read, write or walk, will become more sensitive to and expand upon

opportunities for future learning in the same direction. Similarly, one engaged in learning skills for professional development or recreation (i.e., becoming a plumber, lawyer, martial artist or skydiver) may accumulate experiences which enhance growth and knowledge in the desired direction. However, this accumulation of experience and knowledge will, by necessity, create a mindset and an environment which closes that person off from future learning in other directions.

Third, in Dewey's concept, experience is not strictly an internal event that occurs inside a person's mind and body; rather, it is a collective human phenomenon, and is based on social interaction and interplay with others. On the grand scale, this means that much of what we as individuals know about the world around us is based upon the experience of human beings in the past. We can attribute the existence of technology and civilization to the cumulative learning of our ancestors over countless generations. In the same vein, our assimilation of knowledge is not entirely objective. To a large extent it is shaped by the environment we find ourselves in, whether by birth or by choice. In other words, someone growing up in poverty stricken, inner city environment will experience life very differently from someone growing up in the country or someone being raised in affluence and luxury. As stated by Dewey, "No one would question that a child in a slum tenement has a different experience from that of a child in a cultured home; that the country lad has a different kind of experience from the city boy..." (Dewey, 1938, p. 35).

The implications of Dewey's theory give relevant perspective to the study of the experience of skydiving. In objective terms, the skydiving experience is relatively consistent from one person to the next. This is due to the structure and high degree of

standardization in the method in which skydiving is conducted. In addition, the laws of physics do not vary from one jump to the next. However, in terms of continuity, cumulative life experiences prior to skydiving can lead to vastly different qualitative perceptions of the experience as either positive or negative. Also, the enthusiasm and commitment with which one pursues the sport, or rather decides to never participate again, will be shaped by the degree to which positive or negative emotions are linked to the experience. Other factors, such as the socialization process and integration into the cultural framework of the sport, will be examined later.

Dewey's principle of continuity applies directly to skydiving because of the inherent process of skill development found in most physical activities. In this study it will be illustrated not only that skills are accumulated and assimilated as one develops in the sport, but that the repetition of an anxiety producing event (i.e. exit from the aircraft) leads to increased confidence and decreased anxiety in the future.

Last, Dewey's concept of collective human experience can be examined in the skydiving context to illustrate the impact of technology and past experience. One of the biggest motivators, and certainly the greatest source of emotional reassurance for me in pursuing a career in the sport, was the knowledge that countless people before me had safely participated in millions of skydives without incident. Throughout my life, media exposure and word of mouth had convinced me that skydiving was a viable, safe form of recreation. Movies, television programs and stories from friends had led me to anticipate that skydiving would be an intense, extremely pleasurable activity. My choice to immerse myself in the drop zone culture continues to shape my

perceptions of the sport and the participants, and motivates me to return whenever possible.

The inside perspective: An autobiographical narrative inquiry

This section will illustrate that the perspective of a skydiving insider has the potential to contribute new insights into the full range of emotions experienced in this unique sport. Decades of research on skydiving has revealed a fundamentally common theme regarding the categorization of risk exposure in the sport. Specifically, many researchers conducting qualitative studies on skydiving begin with labeling both the sport of skydiving and the skydivers themselves. Typically, this is a practice utilized by necessity in reductionist research, which seeks to define the world according to absolute, objective principles. As explained by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), "This implies that no matter what any particular person happens to believe, there is a correct and true view of the world. It is a depersonalized notion of truth and meaning" (p. 36). The practice of labeling also applies to formalistic research, which begins with a theory (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and seeks to define the participants according to the boundaries of that theory.

When applied to studies on skydiving, the formalistic or reductionist approach creates an academic framework around the sport and its participants so they may be seen as unique and worthy of study. However, it is problematic on a fundamental level. From the outset, the researcher has begun painting a picture of skydiving that justifies his or her own project, but may also create a negative view of the sport in the eyes of the reader. In the very least, the contextual framework established by the

researcher has the potential to create pre-conceived notions in the mind of the reader regarding the subject of the research in question.

According to Griffith and Hart (2005), "Skydiving is considered to be among the most dangerous sporting activities in the world. Each time a skydiver exits an aircraft, they essentially face death." (p. 1). Whether the effect is negative, positive or even inspirational, such statements are almost certainly going to create an indelible impact on the reader. In this study, trait anxiety towards death and dying was assessed in 54 collegiate aged skydivers and 54 non skydivers of similar age. A statistical analysis was conducted on the questionnaire results and it was concluded that collegiate skydivers tend to fear death less than the control group of non- risk takers.

Other researchers have utilized injury or fatality statistics in order to establish the fact that skydiving is a "high risk sport". For example, Celsi, Rose and Leigh (1993) compared fatality rates in a number of sports, including mountain climbing, scuba diving, ultra light piloting and hang gliding, and concluded that the fatality rate in skydiving was the highest among these sports (1/700 participants each year).

Barrows, Mills and Kassing (2005) collected data relating to injuries and fatalities at an annual event known as The World Freefall Convention from 2000-2001. During the two study periods, which spanned ten days each, 8,976 skydivers made 117,000 skydives and the rate of injuries per skydive was 17.4/10,000. Only one fatality was experienced over this two year study period. In this case, the researchers' use of statistics was effective in analyzing the nature and causes of specific accidents. Such an endeavor may prove useful in an effort to educate the skydiving population and reduce the occurrences of similar accidents in the future.

Skydivers have been referred to as stimulus addicts (Ogilvie, 1974), sensation seekers (Hymbaugh & Garret, 1974; Zuckermann, 1971, 1979; Zuckermann, Bone, Neary, Mangelsdorff & Brustman, 1972), thrill seekers (Chatterton, Vogelsong, Lu & Hudgens, 1997; Greenberg, 1977; Klausner, 1966), action seekers (Aran, 1974) and edgeworkers (Lyng, 1990; Lyng & Snow, 1986). Chatterton et al. (1997) referred to their research participants, who were about to perform their first skydive, as "naïve volunteers" (p. 2503). The researchers installed catheters in the volunteers on the morning of the skydive in order to collect blood and saliva. They measured hormonal changes as well as anxiety levels in young men at several stages before as well as immediately after their first skydive (a tandem jump) to study the effects of this event on the body's endocrine system. Skydiving was described as "a potentially life threatening event" (p. 2503). In addition to physiological and hormonal changes, psychological perception of stress was assessed at intervals before and after the jump to determine the effects of the first skydive on each volunteer.

Anecdotal evidence and common sense would indicate that these respective analyses could be considered reasonable. We do not need to conduct academic research to come to the conclusion that intentionally jumping out of an aircraft and freefalling to the earth for recreation could pose some potential hazards. Indeed, thanks to the efforts of past scholars, we now have a much greater understanding of the sport of skydiving with regard to physiological and emotional changes, psychological states and motivation. However, the logic behind these labels that have been attached to skydivers and their sport does little to justify the impact that these labels have on interested readers. Likely, such readers are led to believe that only the

deviant would partake in such an activity. This is where an insider, describing a wide range of skydiving experiences, could provide great value in enhancing our understanding of the question, "What is it like to skydive?"

As stated by Lipscombe (1999), "research into the experiential nature of skydiving is sparse." (p. 268) The existing body of research by Celsi et al., (1993), Laurendeau (2005), Lipscombe (1999), Lyng (1990) and Lyng and Snow, (1986) is largely based on traditional ethnographic interviews and, as such, has the researchers positioned as separate from the experience they are reporting. In keeping with academic tradition, this separateness of researcher from participant(s) is expected in order to achieve results which are valid, reliable, and can be generalized. Indeed, this separation has fostered the efforts and results which have, to date, provided a wealth of knowledge and understanding about skydiving to the academic community.

However, I believe that the academic world could benefit greatly from a select example of first person narrative in a sport which provides such a unique, subjective experience. As stated by Sparkes (2000), self narrative research represents "highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experiences of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding" (p. 21). Giles and Williams, when speaking about a similar form of self descriptive research (2005) stated, "…such personal narratives may be capable of extending understanding of some aspects of leisure" (p. 4).

In fact, the highly personal nature of this research methodology would potentially be a very effective match with an activity as physically and emotionally intense as skydiving.

The descriptive nature of autobiographical narrative inquiry could provide a bridge between participant and reader. A researcher telling a story from first person perspective could provide the reader with a number of benefits. First, the narrative researcher becomes human and vulnerable, and is in a position to report very personal insights normally left out of research papers. As illustrated by Holt (2003) in his description of autoethnography, the researcher is forced to confront him or herself, and may reveal elements that are somewhat unflattering. This revelation can leave the writer in a vulnerable position, because he or she will have no control over how his/her stories are interpreted. However, the second benefit is that the same obligation which causes the researcher to tell stories that may leave him open to negative judgments also allows him to reflect and report in a way that could potentially provide an even greater emotional impact and insight for the reader than the traditional ethnographic research.

Emotions in skydiving

In this section, the emotional impact of skydiving will be discussed. I will illustrate the range of emotions that have been uncovered in previous research. For the purpose of creating a contextual landscape on the intensity of the skydiving experience and the emotions involved, I will touch upon motivational theories in the existing literature. Although it is not my intent to study and report upon motivation in skydiving, I believe that the impact of many emotional experiences may be intricately linked to reasons for beginning and continuing involvement in the sport. Finally, I will discuss the potential for a first person representation to greatly enhance our current understanding of emotional states in skydiving.

The sport of skydiving contains a number of inherently unique factors not seen or experienced in any other activity. Many of these factors give rise to a myriad of feelings and emotions which skydivers share as a common bond. For example, skydivers confront and overcome certain fears every time they perform a skydive by the simple act of exiting the aircraft. This action provides the participant with an opportunity that is not normally confronted by the average individual on a day to day basis. As stated by Lyng (1990), such a victory over one's fears gives rise to a number of positive benefits, including self-actualization, self-determination and self-realization. Despite the fact that even experienced jumpers with several thousand jumps report feeling anxious and afraid during the climb to altitude (fifteen or twenty minutes leading up to the jump), such feelings give way to exhilaration and even omnipotence as one nears the end of the performance.

The physical environment provides the participant with an array of sensory experiences. The roar of the wind, as well as "the exhilaration of freefall, the relaxation, the peace and tranquility, the silence of the parachute ride, and the physical beauty of the landscapes, give rise to a collection of indescribable feelings which skydivers believe are unique to the recreation of skydiving" (Lipscombe, 1999, p.268). Another sentiment was expressed by a research participant: "...as soon as I exit the plane, it's like stepping into another dimension. Suddenly everything seems very real and very correct. Freefall is much more real than everyday existence" (Lyng, 1990, p. 861). Clearly, here are indications that these skydivers attach a great deal of meaning and significance to their experiences.

In a well cited article, Celsi, Rose and Leigh (1993) endeavored to explain the emotional landscape of skydiving based on a theory of a dramatic world view found in the West. They postulated that "…in Western society the dramatic framework is a fundamental cultural lens through which individuals frame their perceptions, seek their self- identities, and engage in vicarious or actual behaviors" (p. 2). In its most fundamental form, this dramatic construct is based on Greek theatre, which has three distinct phases known as *agon, denouement* and *catharsis*. The agon stage is characterized by the buildup of conflicting forces, resulting in tension between protagonist and antagonistic forces. The denouement stage is when the conflict is resolved, like a climactic struggle between the protagonist and the antagonist. Catharsis is the emotional and psychic release that results from the resolution of conflict. The authors speculated that people experience enculturation from the mass media, which not only provides exposure to and knowledge of unique sport experiences, it also encourages them to live by certain catch phrases, such as "Just do it", "Play hard" and "Go for it". Furthermore, social specialization has led to an increased sense of alienation and a decreased sense of self efficacy from the efforts of productive labor. Therefore, the effects of the mass media, combined with an increased sense of alienation from the productive efforts of one's labor in the workplace (Fletcher, 2004) may lead an increasing number of people to seek intense stimulation in the form of high risk sport to release tension they feel in their everyday lives (Celsi et al., 1993).

In a fascinating study on the "uniqueness and power" of skydiving, Lipscombe (1999) established a comparison between Maslow's 'Peak Experience'

and the experience of jumping. He stated that in the early stages of skydivers' careers, they tend to frame their experiences from an 'opponent process' perspective. This refers to the vast contrast in emotional states, from extreme anxiety before the jump to absolute elation afterwards. In his study on veteran skydivers, it was found that the experience of jumping tends to shift towards something comparable to a 'peak experience', and that the magnitude of this experience seems to reoccur very frequently. This was almost contrary to the presumed nature of a 'peak experience', which is expected to occur only a few times in one's lifetime. This study focused on veteran skydivers only and did not provide a detailed, chronological timeline through emotional changes experienced as a skydiver progresses in experience.

With regard to emotions involved in fatalities, it appears that skydivers choose to construct their own interpretation of reality which is often very different from the perceptions of non-jumpers. Laurendeau (2005) discussed the ways in which skydivers construct and maintain the belief that they can maintain control over the risk in their sport. In this study he suggested that skydivers refer to an innate survival instinct that an individual needs in order to successfully negotiate the edge – the border between chaos and order. He stated that skydivers use this theory as a rationale for continuing participation, particularly when they face dangerous or unusual circumstances (i.e. a parachute malfunction) and perform the appropriate corrective action. When a skydiver "goes in" (dies in a fatal impact), survivors may point to the incident as proof that the victim lacked the innate survival instinct necessary for remaining composed in the face of danger. Alternatively, if the fatal accident did not appear to be the result of human error, they may draw on the notion of fate and

attribute the fatality to unforeseen or uncontrollable circumstances (Laurendeau, 2006).

Summary

In this review, I provided a rationale for the proposed methodology. I highlighted a number of different motivations in skydiving that have been illustrated in various studies. It was not the goal of this study to attempt to uncover a new theory regarding the motivation or personality traits of skydivers. Rather, it was hoped that the contextual understanding surrounding motivation in high risk sport could be deepened and enriched by a first person narrative methodology.

In the first section, I highlighted the fundamental categorization that has occurred in a number of studies on skydiving (Aran, 1974; Celsi et al., 1993; Greenberg, 1977; Griffith & Hart, 2005; Hymbaugh & Garret, 1974; Klausner, 1966; Lyng, 1990; Lyng & Snow, 1986; Ogilvie, 1974; Zuckermann, 1971, 1979; Zuckermann et al., 1972). These authors have referred to skydivers by a number of terms, such as stimulus addicts, sensation seekers, thrill seekers, action seekers and edgeworkers. I argue that such labels only serve to widen the gap between researcher and participant, regardless of the position of the researcher within the skydiving community. Many of the researchers have been insiders (experienced skydivers) and have provided rich, powerful insights into the understanding of motivation in skydiving (Celsi et al., 1993; Griffith, 2005; Laurendeau, 2005; Lipscombe, 1999; Lyng, 1990). However, their chosen research methodology has constrained and, to some extent, limited their ability to broaden the aesthetic landscape of which they are

reporting on. It was hoped that this project was able to provide a small measure of insight into current understanding of one skydiver's emotions in skydiving.

Furthermore, it was expected that, as results emerged, a pattern developed regarding the emotional intensity and arousal levels during experiences ranging from my progression through student to intermediate status. Price and Bundesen (2005) reported that there is a wide swing in emotional sensation from pre jump to post jump in novice skydivers, and that this trend seems to decline in jumpers with greater experience levels. In addition, they found that experienced skydivers tend to maintain more stable emotional pre jump states than novices.

Later in the first section, I created a case for autobiographical narrative inquiry as a research methodology in skydiving. Due to the highly personalized nature of self-reporting, I argued that experiences in skydiving, from a first person narrative, could offer great intellectual and emotional impact, as well as aesthetic value.

In the second section, I discussed the experiential nature of skydiving and a number of motivational theories found in the literature. Clearly, there are a number of fascinating theories in the skydiving literature regarding motivation. Celsi et al. (1993) argued that there is a complex interplay within a dramatic world view seen in western civilization, influenced by mass media enculturation and social specialization. Lyng (1990) focused on the notion that alienation and lack of significance in the workplace drives people to seek risk in recreation. He sees the concept of edgework (in this case skydiving) as an opportunity for self actualization, self determination and self realization. Laurendeau (2006) views skydiving as a

highly stratified subculture to which participants aspire to belong to and "climb the social ladder" to gain status. In addition, he viewed the social hierarchy as a critical element in establishing and maintaining boundaries of control. This is critical in motivation, because he stated (from Lyng, 1990) that "edgeworkers" are not motivated to take risks that appear to be dependent on luck. Rather, they gravitate towards risks which are within their perceived ability to control.

The current body of research on the experiential nature of skydiving is growing. As shown, there are several researchers (Fletcher, 2004; Laurendeau, 2006; Lipscombe, 1999; Lyng, 1990) who have produced valuable works on high risk sport from a sociological or leisure studies perspective. This paper was intended to explore the intensity of emotional experiences, as well as the shifts in these experiences that may occur in one skydiver over time. The study covered a temporal progression from the beginning of my career, passing from neophyte through student, solo, novice to intermediate status. I hope that a greater understanding of the skydiving experience was gained through a vivid, detailed study of a single research subject from a first person representation.

Chapter 3

Method and procedure

Prior to commencing the study

As this research was based entirely on the first person perspective, it was determined that a review by the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation Ethics Review Board was not required. There were no research participants to be included, other than the author.

The idea for this research was conceived after I had attained novice status (25 jumps). However, the passage of time from the beginning of my skydiving career to the conception of this study was relatively short. I began skydiving in August of 2004, completing only a tandem and my first jump solo. It wasn't until nearly a year later (July, 2005) that I resumed skydiving. From July until late October of 2005, I completed freefall training, graduated from student status to solo freefall jumper, and reached novice level.

When this study was conceived with the help of my supervisor, I began to reflect on some of my earliest experiences. Although I hadn't kept detailed written records of my jumps to that point, I had the benefit of my log book, which all skydivers keep to record important milestones in their career. Thus, the experiences from this time in my career were based somewhat on memory.

Span of the study

This study covered a variety of experiences in and around skydiving from the beginning of my career through the attainment of an intermediate skill level. During this time I completed well over one hundred skydives. I attained several Certificates

of Proficiency issued by the Canadian Sport Parachute Association, and a National Coaching Certification Program Level 1 Coach Rating. More recently I attained a Jumpmaster rating, which qualifies me to instruct and dispatch First Jump students. Skydives took place at my home drop zone in central Alberta, as well as at a large drop zone in Arizona, which I visited for two weeks in January 2006, and again in January 2007.

Description of the sport and terminology

Skydiving takes place at a drop zone, also known as a DZ. This is a facility which is authorized for the use of airspace, and has sufficient landing area for skydiving. It usually consists of a runway, a large grassy field with at least a 100m radius, and a series of buildings. The center of administrative activity on all drop zones is known as manifest. This is where plane loads of skydivers are organized and dispatched, and payment is accepted. Typically, there will also be a building for packing parachutes which will be semi-enclosed to protect parachute nylon from the sun. Usually, there is an additional structure known as the mock-up, which is a permanent model of the aircraft fuselage, door and wing. The mock-up is designed to practice aircraft exits, which must be carefully coordinated.

The most important piece of skydiving gear is known as a rig. It is a harness and container system that fits on the skydiver's back and contains two parachutes, or canopies – the main canopy and the reserve canopy. If the skydiver or jumper experiences a malfunction upon deployment of their main canopy, they are usually required to jettison it before activating their reserve canopy. This procedure is known as a cutaway. Most rigs contain an automatic activation device, or AAD. It is a

barometric pressure sensing device which reads altitude and rate of descent. In the event that a skydiver is falling too fast at a given altitude, it will fire an explosive charge that automatically deploys the reserve canopy prior to impact. This can save a jumper's life should they be rendered unconscious or incapacitated for any reason, or if they simply fail to react appropriately to a high speed malfunction and continue falling below 1,250 feet above ground level.

There are five phases to each skydive, and students are taught a series of skills to practice for each phase. The preparatory phase involves rehearsal of the planned skydive (also known as a "dirt dive"), as well as exit practice, relaxation techniques and visualization. The in flight phase is during the climb to altitude, and this is where the skill of spotting is learned (calculating where to exit the plane in relation to your position above the ground). The freefall portion of the skydive includes the exit, and what is known as the "working" portion of the skydive. Jumpers usually exit the aircraft at 11,000 feet above ground level (AGL), but this may be as high as 13,000-15,000 feet at a DZ with large aircraft. Freefall usually lasts between 30-60 seconds, depending on exit altitude and the type of freefall performed. A stable, belly to earth position, known as "belly flying", provides a lot of wind resistance. A jumper in this configuration will reach a terminal velocity of approximately 120 miles per hour twelve seconds after exit. However, the more streamlined body positions in freeflying, such as sit-flying or head down, cause an increased fall rate, resulting in speeds of up to 200 miles per hour or greater.

One popular way to begin skydiving is to complete a tandem jump. Here, a senior instructor wears a rig with a parachute big enough for two people. On the ride

up to altitude, he attaches himself to the passenger, who wears a special harness as well. Then the tandem master and his passenger exit the plane together, freefall for 45 seconds or so and ride the canopy back down to earth together. This is a very comfortable, safe way to get a taste of skydiving, but not required to participate in the sport.

To become a student, one must take the First Jump Course. This is a six hour training program designed to teach new people all the skills they need to jump safely from a lower altitude. Here, no freefall skills are learned. The first solo jump is performed as an Instructor Assisted Deployment (IAD), in which the instructor, or Jump Master (JM), deploys the pilot chute for students as they exit the aircraft. This gives the student a chance to focus entirely on maintaining awareness and holding a stable body position. More importantly, the student will demonstrate to the JM whether or not he or she can cope with the intense physical and mental demands of climbing out of the open door of an aircraft at 3,500 feet and perform the exit procedure on command.

If the student can demonstrate a stable body position on the IAD jump, he or she will be allowed to progress to Accelerated Free Fall training, or AFF. This is an intense course consisting of six skydives that build on skill development in a progressive sequence. Graduation from AFF means the student will be allowed to freefall solo at the club level. After demonstrating several more skills over the next few jumps, the student will be awarded Solo status from the Canadian Sport Parachute Association, after which he or she can begin working towards other certificates and ratings. Further explanation of the steps in a skydiver's career can be

found in the next section, where I explain my progress from the beginning of my career to the present day.

The researcher

My first skydiving experience happened on August 8th, 2004. That day, I completed a tandem skydive. My skydiving career began less than one month later. On September 4th, 2004 I took part in the First Jump Course and accomplished my first solo skydive the next day. These events occurred coincidentally with my first days of graduate studies at the University of Alberta in the fall of 2004.

The following summer, I achieved several milestones in skydiving. I completed Accelerated Freefall Training at my home drop zone and, shortly after, finished the requirements for Solo status from the CSPA. By the end of the season I had completed my twenty fifth skydive. Included in these jumps were all the practical requirements to be awarded my "A" Certificate of Proficiency (CoP) from the national organization. As a result I was now qualified to jump with one other person (referred to as a "two way"), as long as that person was either a coach or a B CoP holder with at least one hundred jumps. Several months later, I attended an annual skydiving training camp at one of the world's largest drop zones – Skydive Arizona. While there I completed 59 skydives over a two week period. The skills I learned on this trip, combined with the number of jumps, allowed me to achieve my "B" CoP. This accomplishment permitted me to jump take part in formation skydives with groups of other jumpers. In addition, I was now qualified to take part in various courses to attain coach status and other ratings.

Near the end of the skydiving season in the fall of 2006, I completed a Level One Technical course for skydiving through the National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP). In January of 2007, I attended the same annual event at Skydive Arizona, completing thirty five jumps. As of this time, I have completed well over one hundred skydives and am currently working on finishing the internship requirements to become an NCCP Level One Coach. In addition, I have just completed a Jumpmaster Course, which entitles me to instruct and dispatch First Jump students from the aircraft.

Like any sport, the rate of skill development in skydiving varies from one individual to the next. I have never felt particularly talented or gifted in learning skills rapidly. However, throughout my skydiving career, I have endeavored to achieve as many milestones as possible with the minimum jump numbers required. My current experience level is quite low to have attained a "B" CoP and be working on a Coach One rating. As stated earlier, I do not feel this to be a function of great natural ability.

However, I believe that my background in other sports and life experience contribute to my approach to skydiving, as well as provide me with a unique perspective in conducting this research project. I have been practicing martial arts for twenty five years, the last twenty of which I have spent learning and teaching Taekwondo. The disciplined and highly structured environment found in a martial arts school both demands and develops a strong sense of community, respect for authority, personal self control and physical, emotional and mental self mastery. In addition, in all martial arts schools there exists a highly stratified social structure, with peer recognition and prestige attached to the attainment of each new belt rank.

As a Taekwondo instructor, I have experienced the satisfaction of not only having attained the rank of 5th Degree Black Belt, I have been fortunate enough to have taught hundreds of students over a number of years and seen several of them achieve their Black Belt as well. These experiences have shaped my values, and I believe the skills learned in martial arts have given me some advantages over others in learning skydiving as well.

Studies have illustrated the fact that skydivers tend to experience significant stress prior to jumping in the student and novice stages of their careers. Indeed, it is difficult to describe the experience to non- jumpers due to the extreme level of arousal and the intensity of one's thoughts, feelings and emotions prior to exiting the aircraft. Although my early skydiving experiences were tempered with a range of emotions from absolute elation to significant anxiety, I never felt a sense of panic. I feel strongly that a decade of competition experience in Taekwondo provided me with coping skills that I would not otherwise possess.

Furthermore, I believe my new role as a coach in skydiving has been greatly enhanced by a number of skills learned in teaching Taekwondo. Observation skills, feedback skills, planning skills, concentration and empathy are all qualities needed for effective teaching and coaching in physical activity. Just as these skills have served me well in teaching Taekwondo, they have facilitated my development as a skydiving coach as well.

Methods of data collection

Data were collected in a variety of ways for the period of this study. Since the beginning of my career I have been keeping a written account of all jumps in the

form of my log book. Generally, log book entries are made within 30 minutes after each skydive. This makes the log book one of the most valuable tools for recalling particular experiences.

During the training camps I attended in Arizona, I made tape recorded reflections on a number of key experiences. In addition, I kept detailed accounts of all skydives in the form of a supplemental journal. This was completed immediately after significant jumps throughout the day, as well as a summary each evening. The more detailed field notes were made to record thoughts and perceptions that can't be recorded easily in a log book due to space constraints.

Unpacking the stories

The descriptive text of this project comprises a number of events from my skydiving career. As stated earlier, the experiences are presented in first person narrative form, told as real life stories as they actually occurred. This is one of the most important distinctions of this particular project – the fact that I have dual role in the form of researcher and skydiver/research participant. This duality creates both an opportunity and a responsibility for layering the experiences of skydiving and storytelling in such a way as to explain the growth that happens within on two levels. As explained by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), "Thinking about an inquiry in narrative terms allows us to conceptualize the inquiry experience as a storied one on several levels" (p. 71).

In each narrative, the story is told through my eyes as a skydiver. Then it becomes necessary to retell the story as a researcher. The retelling is the inquiry into the storied experience and allows me to analyze the story to understand my growth.

That growth and change takes the form of my development as a skydiver, as well as the change in the storyteller which manifests itself as part of the process of simply telling the story. The retelling, or *unpacking,* of each story is crucial to the project, just as the principle of continuity was crucial to Dewey's theory of experience. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) view the unpacking process to be integral to narrative inquiry. "Following Dewey, our principal interest in experience is the growth and transformation in the life story that we as researchers and our participants author. Therefore, difficult as it may be to tell a story, the more difficult but important task is the retelling of stories that allow for growth and change" (p. 71). In other words, continued growth is facilitated as a result of the retelling or unpacking process. The importance of this process makes it a necessary step which will follow each narrative in the project.

Chapter 4

Beginning Experiences in Skydiving

The narrative accounts contained in this chapter describe some of the thoughts, emotions and reflections from my initial skydiving experiences. Beginning with a story of the tandem skydive I completed in August 2004, some of the emotional tension of my first two skydiving experiences are highlighted and explored. Lipscomb's "opponent process" theory (1999) is illustrated by the vast range of experiences along the emotional continuum described in these narratives. For these first two jumps, which took place in the fall of 2004, I experienced significant levels of fear and anxiety before each jump due to the unknown nature and perceived risks in the sport of skydiving. This was in sharp contrast to the feelings of joy and elation experienced during and after each jump. I hope that the description of these emotional tensions and the contrast they create will establish a starting point for some of the emotional changes experienced as my skydiving career progresses.

Tandem Story

The large, white sign in the ditch was partially obscured by trees as we approached that early August afternoon. Only when we were very close did it become visible. The large, bright letters grabbed my attention like an auto wreck on the side of the road. However, it was not morbid curiosity that struck me at that moment. It was a feeling of excitement, tempered by a rising level of anxiety. I was staring at a single word stenciled in big, navy blue letters against the white backdrop: "SKYDIVE". Below the letters was a huge arrow indicating a left turn ahead.

The driver, Adam, turned to me and smiled. "Almost there!" He chuckled in a Vincent Price, mock horror- movie voice as though to punctuate the sudden reality of the moment. As he seemed to be maintaining his relaxed demeanor, I smiled back, wondering to myself whether or not his effort was as much a false show of bravado as mine. He and I, together with his girlfriend and infant daughter, had taken a relaxing drive through the Central Alberta countryside on a warm summer day. The drive was about to come to an end, as was the relaxed mood of the day. In less than an hour we would be realizing a new reality, one that what was, for me, a childhood dream.

We were going to jump out of a plane.

Until that moment, I had told myself that engaging in small talk was the best way to cope with the unacknowledged fear and anxiety that was lurking within me. But the appearance of that simple sign drove home the reality that we were about to take a giant leap into the unknown. Voluntarily, I had faced nerves and competition jitters countless times before as an athlete. In a competitive sport environment, the fear and uncertainty was something I was accustomed to and even somewhat comfortable with. However, this situation was something for which I had no idea how to prepare. I could not begin to imagine what was to come. Although I had long been eager to find out what it would be like to skydive, the discomfort I was presently feeling made me question the logic of this decision.

Adam slowed the Jeep and turned west, just as the arrow on the sign had indicated. A half mile later down a dusty gravel road, we came face to face with another sign pointing us off the road to a large, grassy parking area. He nosed the vehicle into an empty spot and killed the engine.

Six weeks earlier, we had argued about the details of our proposed skydive. I had expected to arrive in the morning and spend most of the day at the drop zone in a classroom. I wanted to take the First Jump Course, which would provide me with the knowledge and skills needed to be allowed to complete a solo jump. But Adam had other ideas. He planned to do a tandem jump, which would be completed much quicker and require little training. "I know it's more expensive," he stated emphatically, "but we get to freefall on our very first jump". I had to agree that the idea of jumping from eleven thousand feet and freefalling for forty five seconds was exciting. Conversely, the First Jump Solo would be from three thousand five hundred feet, and a jump master in the plane would deploy the student's parachute immediately upon exit. I had dreamed about skydiving since I was very young. I wanted to be in charge of my own destiny for this adventure. The tandem would be done while harnessed directly to an instructor, who would be responsible for every aspect of the skydive. Essentially, I would be a passenger, when I wanted to be a skydiver. After several discussions, I compromised. I needed a ride from Adam to get to the drop zone. A tandem jump it would be.

I began to realize very quickly that luxury was not the order of the day. As we walked towards what appeared to be the central hub of activity, I was somewhat surprised to see that all the buildings on these grounds were simple wooden structures painted white that had been strategically situated on the corner of a very large, grassy field. The presence of technology was noticeably absent, as though the place was intentionally designed to downplay the influence of man. Even the building designated for packing parachutes was nothing more than a lean-to type shelter like a

farmer would use for storing bales of hay, with patches of old carpet laid out on the ground to help protect parachute gear and the knees of those packing it. The only sound was the quiet drone of a single engine plane climbing to altitude two miles above us.

The understatement of the place, combined with the peace and quiet of being in the country, had a welcome effect on me. Although I was acutely aware of what was going to happen in the very near future, I felt calm and relaxed. These few man made structures comprised a modest, tasteful frame for a beautiful piece of art: the prairie sky. The grand, blue canvas overhead seemed to take on a majesty I had never noticed before. I knew that it was no different from any other sky. However, something about it inspired me. I was struck with a rare sense of peace, awe and appreciation.

We followed another sign to the registration office, known as "manifest". We were greeted with warm smiles and friendly faces. When asked whether or not we would like to have a cameraman jump with each of us to record the event on camera, Adam chose to pay for the video, while I graciously declined. After all, I knew that I would be continuing with the sport someday soon.

We were led outside to a scale model of the aircraft door and wing made of plywood and two-by-fours. Known as the "mock-up", it was a structure designed for the sole purpose of rehearsing our exit from the aircraft. A former military man named John demonstrated for us in drill- instructor style the procedure we would be following as we reached jump altitude. We were to seat ourselves on the floor of the crammed aircraft in a predetermined order. We were told to remain as stationary as

possible during the takeoff and climb to altitude. Near the end of the flight, each of us would be firmly attached to our respective tandem masters by the body harnesses we wore. Then, at eleven thousand feet above the earth, the door would be opened. At that point, Adam, together with his tandem master and cameraman, would make their way to the door, wait for the cameraman to position himself on the wing strut and exit simultaneously. Due to the importance of our exit point in relation to the landing area, my tandem master and I were to follow them out the door in a controlled fashion as quickly as possible. Just like that.

We were told that we would exit the plane from a seated position and attempt to do a complete somersault to achieve a stable, belly-to-earth orientation. The tandem master would then deploy a drogue chute to slow our freefall down to a safe speed of one hundred twenty miles per hour, rather than the one hundred eighty miles per hour we would reach without such an aid. This reduction in speed would make the main parachute deployment much safer and more reliable. Then, we would be free to enjoy the moment for forty five seconds or so, at which point the tandem master would deploy our canopy and we would make our way back down to earth safely. It all sounded simple enough, but I was in awe of the relaxed demeanor and professionalism of our instructors. We were about to jump out of a plane, and their expressions were in stark contrast to the unease I felt inside my body.

With little time to digest the magnitude of what was happening, we were soon back in manifest for our gear up call. They fitted us with jumpsuits, goggles and body harnesses, and led us out to the plane. While Adam's cameraman filmed our last moments before boarding, we received final instructions on exit procedures.

Awareness of body position was crucial; our arms and legs were to be kept under control for safety during freefall. We nodded our acknowledgement, gave a high – five and climbed aboard.

The plane began its bumpy ride across the grassy field to the beginning of the runway. We turned to face downhill, and the pilot pushed the throttle all the way forward. Slowly at first, we began to accelerate. Soon, we were airborne and began climbing.

After what seemed like an eternity, the pilot pushed the nose of the aircraft down to a level attitude and cut back on the throttle. Our jumpmasters attached themselves to our respective harnesses. We were now on jump run. The time for wonder and anticipation was over. We were about to experience skydiving first hand. After a minor adjustment in our heading, the pilot called, "Door!", and reached over to break open our sealed cabin. We were greeted by a blast of air that felt like a pail of cold water in the face. The sudden roar of the wind was an intense shock for which I could not have prepared!

I swallowed hard and dried my palms on the legs of my jumpsuit. At the same time, I was grinning ear to ear with a feeling of anticipation and excitement. I had complete awareness of the magnitude of what we were about to do. I was a passenger on a journey into the unknown, but I refused to let fear turn me into a terrified bystander. The emotions I was feeling seemed like a stark contrast to the sublime expressions on the faces of the instructor and cameraman in front of me. I noticed that Adam, my comrade in this adventure, appeared to be experiencing a little more

anxiety than I felt at that moment. His usual bravado was noticeably absent, as was the colour in his face.

Calmly, the videographer climbed out onto the landing gear while gripping the wing strut, and positioned himself facing the door. Simultaneously, Adam moved with his tandem master and sat in the doorway with their feet dangling two miles above the earth, just as rehearsed earlier. They gave an enthusiastic "thumbs up" for the camera and performed a coordinated rocking motion to allow the cameraman to synchronize his exit with theirs. One, two, three……and they were gone, smoothly disappearing into the abyss below us.

Without delay, I crawled forward into the open doorway and assumed an identical position to what my companion had done seconds earlier. I shoved my legs out the door and the wind grabbed them, beckoning me into the sky. I tucked my feet under the fuselage and crossed my arms against my chest to ensure my limbs would not interfere with stability once clear of the aircraft.

"Are you ready?" Chris yelled in my ear. "YEAH!" I shouted back. "OK!" We rocked forward… "One!"….backwards… "Two"… I could scarcely believe what was happening, but I was entirely focused on the simple tasks ahead of me. "THREE!" At that instant we were free of the plane. Lazily, we somersaulted forward into the open sky and smoothly performed a front loop. I could feel Chris arch his body to stop our forward rotation. He tapped my shoulders firmly, directing me to extend my arms to the sides of my head in a stable box position, and quickly deployed our drogue parachute. The intensity of our acceleration was unforgettable. Wide eyed, I stared at the ground for a few seconds, inhaled deeply and let out a

shout of exhilaration. The adrenaline was coursing through my veins and I reveled in the moment. Forgetting the instructions about keeping my arms and legs stable, I pumped my fists several times and felt Chris' hands firmly grasp my wrists. I needed to keep in mind that I was part of a two man team, and that safety was a priority.

I took a deep breath and soaked in the sensations hitting my body. I gazed in wonder at the horizon, the clouds, and the grid map of green and brown fields below us. It was a marvelous, indescribable feeling. The intense roar of the wind was well beyond my expectations. I yelled again but my voice was lost in the wind, and I doubted that even Chris could hear me, though his ears were mere inches from my mouth. The blast of 120 mile per hour wind on my face stretched my mouth, distorting my massive grin and adding a comical feature to the experience.

The vivid intensity of these sights, sounds, feelings and emotions was interrupted by movement behind me. I knew that Chris was deploying our parachute. Momentarily, I felt the bump- bump sensation of the canopy being stripped out of its container as the lines unraveled. In an instant, we were yanked upright by the opening shock of the parachute grabbing air. The force of our rapid deceleration was significant, marking a welcome return to a safe rate of descent back to earth.

I was struck by the stark contrast in sensations. A moment earlier, I had been experiencing intense, almost violent sounds and feelings. Suddenly, I was floating quietly four thousand feet above the earth, hanging securely below a large, colorful blanket of nylon. The only sound was the breeze rippling away at our parachute. It was almost surreal, but I truly felt that I had not lived until this moment.

"OK, Kevin. Good job!" Chris performed a control check on our canopy to ensure it would return us to earth safely. "Now you can grab the steering toggles from me. Go ahead and have some fun!"

I now had the chance to fly the canopy that had literally saved our lives. Steering the parachute was done by pulling downwards on either one of the handles known as steering toggles. I performed a number of turns, once holding the toggle long enough to cause the earth to spiral below us. It was thrilling to have experienced the intensity of the freefall, but also comforting to regain a feeling of control.

Soon we were nearing the ground, so Chris took over control of the parachute. Three hundred feet or so above the earth, he made a fast turn into the wind. We gained speed, just as had happened when I made rapid turns at high altitude. But the wind in our faces slowed our groundspeed. Our descent flattened out as Chris expertly brought us in for a perfect, stand- up landing.

As we drove home that day, we talked excitedly about future skydives. We had each received a discount voucher to be applied towards the First Jump Course, which would be required if we were ever going to jump alone. As I tried to process the experience of that afternoon I was overwhelmed by the range of emotions and sensations I had experienced. In a sense it was unreal; I struggled for words to describe these feelings, but simply could not find any that would suffice. Powerful memories were etched in my brain, and I had a great feeling of satisfaction. I was now completely certain that this was something I needed to pursue. I would be back to jump again soon.

Inquiring into the story

This story begins with a sense of awakening. We are brought fully into the moment by a large sign, pointing the way to the realization of a childhood dream. The drop zone, a place of thrills, excitement and wonder, lies just around the corner. Yet juxtaposed in the same time and space are some deep–seated fears and anxieties. For the experience of skydiving, which I had dreamed about and desired for decades, was imminent, but would come with a price. I was going to step far out of my comfort zone, and was completely uncertain about what that would mean and how I would react. And although the appearance of the sign in the ditch brings a sense of anticipation and wonder, there is also an ominous feeling of "no turning back," a realization that what is about to come is very near and very real.

We move back in time to learn about the planning and preparation that led up to this fateful day. Six weeks earlier, an interesting tension had developed as a result of a discussion with a coworker. I had been perplexed at his desire to take part in a tandem skydive rather than the First Jump Course. At that point I knew little about skydiving, but I understood that if I were to continue in the sport, the First Jump Course would be a mandatory step. While the tandem was an attractive option for first time skydivers, it was essentially a joyride – a passive experience with no progression to follow. The tandem experience offered freefall on your first skydive rather than an immediate, instructor – assisted parachute deployment, but I envisioned greater control over my adventure.

There is an element of foreshadowing in this choice between a tandem and a solo jump. Through the discussion with Adam, I revealed a hint of my independent

nature, as well as the certainty with which I saw a future in skydiving. I had dreamed of skydiving from a very young age, and had always envisioned wearing my own parachute rig and having my fate in my own hands. I believed a tandem to be a compromise in the adventure, a relinquishing of control over my destiny. I made this compromise for two reasons – not only because of logistics, but because of the anticipated camaraderie of sharing a similar experience. It was comforting to be "in this together" with a close friend. Once the decision to do a tandem was made, I came to appreciate that camaraderie. Indeed, it was a great comfort as we approached the drop zone that day.

We were welcomed into the drop zone environment with warmth and courtesy. The Spartan, almost primitive nature of the facility was in direct contrast to the professionalism of the coaches and instructors who provided our training and jumped with us that day. We were briefed in a succinct yet thorough manner; with a few simple instructions and realistic practice, the concept of skydiving began to move from the abstract to the concrete. The distant drone of an aircraft, as well as the magnificent sky above us, provided an ironic tranquility to the scene – ironic because of the anxiety within. Everything seemed very real – the plain, understated buildings that constituted the drop zone, the beautiful blue sky above, the airplanes taking off full of skydivers and landing empty, the excitement and anticipation, and, of course, the fear and uncertainty. Yet everything seemed very right, like all these elements had come together to contribute an integral part to this amazing experience.

As we enter the aircraft and begin the climb to altitude, an internal battle ensues. Eagerness, joy and excitement are vigorously attempting to ward off fear and

anxiety. At times it seems as though the negative emotions will conquer all, but I am uplifted by small things. Strangely, the lack of colour in the face of my companion spurs me on. Calmness and confidence in the expressions of our Tandem Masters and cameraman encourages me. Anticipation is both friend and enemy – it can bring on more anxiety or greater excitement, depending on what thoughts are held within. As much as my rational mind questions the logic of this undertaking, my passionate side revels in the sensory bombardment of this moment. I am engaged in this struggle, absorbing the experience with awe and gratitude.

The door opens and the wind is fierce. The battle between fear and excitement reaches a feverish crescendo. My friend vanishes through the open door into thin air below, inadvertently galvanizing my resolve. Seconds later, my Tandem Master and I follow them into freefall. I enter another dimension, one that holds unbelievable sights, sounds, feelings, sensations and freedom. It is surreal, it is vivid and it is extremely powerful. I have never felt so exhilarated. Although there is no time to quantify this event, I now know firsthand what a peak experience is.

The parachute ride is quiet, tranquil and comforting. It is a return to some measure of control over our environment. Although still under the influence of gravity, our rate of descent is slowed down to a safe and manageable speed. Like the cool–down after an intense workout, it is a segue to a state of rest. In this case, it is a transition to our landing and safe return to earth. I am extremely grateful for the perfectly inflated canopy over our heads. I enjoy the beautiful scenery of the landscape and fully appreciate the magnificence of this experience.

In his discussion on the principle of continuity, Dewey (1938) addresses the fact that not all experiences contribute equally to future growth. Even highly stimulating but disconnected experiences may have a neutral or even negative influence on the development of a person. Indeed, the vast majority of people who try skydiving once never repeat the experience, so it becomes a distant memory with no influence over their futures.

In my case, however, this experience solidified a deep–seated motivation to pursue skydiving as a legitimate sport for reasons well beyond the physical sensations associated with freefall. I felt a strong desire to belong to that select group of people who jumped regularly. I was instilled with a desire to become competent at the sport, although I had no idea what steps would be needed. I imagined myself confidently teaching and coaching other people, just as I had done for many years in the martial arts. Furthermore, I envisioned the tremendous feeling of accomplishment that must come with facing one's fears and learning to control them after repeatedly exiting an airplane from two miles above the ground. That alone was a worthy challenge, and certainly not one for the faint of heart. In reality, I suffered from a significant fear of heights. Becoming a skydiver, as opposed to someone who did a skydive, would be a huge accomplishment and a great opportunity for personal growth.

In truth there was a myriad of reasons why I had a burning desire to skydive again. I could scarcely describe what I had seen, heard and felt that day, even though the images, sounds and sensations were burned in my memory. However, I had even greater difficulty describing the transformation that had occurred within me. I could

not fully understand my own motivation or obsession. All I knew was that I had changed.

First Jump Course

It was a dismal, rainy morning in early September. Driving out to the drop zone for the First Jump Course, I was too exhausted to be excited. At 3 a.m. the night before, I had just finished my last of five consecutive ten-hour shifts. I loved my new job as a bar manager, but it certainly took its toll on me, both physically and mentally. In fact, it made extracurricular activities difficult. Normally, I would spend most of the day on Sunday recovering. Today, however, I would be sitting in a classroom for six hours having slept less than four hours the night before. It was amusing to think that I was going to be taking a skydiving course while in a sleep–deprived state. My body ached from fatigue; nonetheless, I was eager to learn. I would not let a short night's sleep prevent me from getting the most out of this course.

Sometime during the 45 minute drive, it struck me suddenly that I had forgotten to phone ahead and book my slot for the course. As it turned out, there was to be only one other student in the course that day, and the instructor was less than inspiring. I later learned that, like many other senior members of this drop zone, he had a small holiday trailer and slept on the premises most weekends. Clearly, he was not thrilled to be dragged out of bed to teach a tiny class of only two students. At times that day, I remember being frustrated by the rants of the man, who often used off color language to get his point across.

As the day wore on, the weather seemed unlikely to improve. The temperature hovered around seven degrees Celsius, and the wind and rain were persistent enough

to keep us grounded. At the end of the course we had to accept a "rain check" and return another day. Luckily for me, my brother and his wife lived very close by, so I was able to lay low and wait for the weather to change.

The next morning brought sunshine, and with it a renewed sense of excitement and anticipation. A phone call after breakfast confirmed that I could get on a load right away if I were to arrive at the drop zone shortly. I left immediately. As I drove, butterflies filled my stomach. I remembered the range of mixed emotions I had felt the day of my tandem jump. Of course, the situation and the feelings were similar. However, this time I had to admit that the inclement weather the previous day had removed a lot of potential stress from the course. I had been somewhat relieved at the end of the day because, as much as I was eager to skydive again, the thought of actually carrying through with it left me feeling very nervous. Having such short notice before my jump today afforded me little time to worry.

Once at the drop zone, I received a very brief refresher course on in-flight and exit procedures, as well as canopy landing instructions. Just as all First Jump Solo students do, I was going to perform an "IAD", or Instructor Assisted Deployment. This meant that I would be guided through the climb-out and the exit by an instructor known as a Jumpmaster, and he would be out on the wing with me to deploy my pilot chute as I left the plane. This would simplify the jump and help ensure that the most important factor in this endeavor – the parachute deployment – was out of my hands and entrusted to someone with experience and training.

Shortly after I arrived, my gear-up call was made. With no time to waste, I was fitted with a jumpsuit, gloves, helmet, goggles, and my very own parachute. The

act of donning this gear brought a subtle but tangible shift in my attitude. It gave me a sense of security to be snuggly fitted in a jumpsuit and parachute rig. A one way radio attached to my chest strap would allow an instructor on the ground to guide me in for a safe landing. It was time to board the plane.

The climb to altitude was very fast. When compared with my tandem skydive from 11,000 feet a month earlier, the time it took to reach 3,500 feet was alarmingly short. Being the heaviest student on the load, I was going to be first out of the plane. It was a position I both relished and dreaded, because although I was eager to face my fear head–on, the thought of climbing out the open door all alone was enough to make my mouth dry and my palms sweaty. At the same time, I was spurred on by the desire to prove to myself that I could do this. I had to overcome my fear and find out what it would be like to skydive.

When it was time, my Jumpmaster turned to the pilot and said, "Door". The blast of cool air was sobering. I could scarcely believe what was happening. He studied our position over the ground for a few seconds, then turned to me and looked me in the eyes with resolve, then yelled so as to be heard over the roar of the wind; "Are you ready to skydive?" This was more like an order than a question. He had an intense expression on his face and was all business. "Yeah!" I screamed back with more enthusiasm than I felt. His eyes burned into mine. "Climb all the way out!" he barked. His forceful demeanor drove home the fact that this was indeed the moment of truth. For an instant, I felt very much alone, but knew I could not hesitate. I swallowed hard, grasped the sides of the door frame and, against all better judgment, aggressively thrust my right foot out and down to the step just above the tire. I knew I

had to move with authority against the force of the wind. I performed the climb out without delay, and before I knew it was hanging from the wing strut, feet dangling in open space. At that moment I experienced a level of fear and uncertainty that surpassed the feelings I had experienced during the tandem. I was placing complete faith and trust in my Jumpmaster and my parachute, and the uncertainty was sobering. However, my level of anxiety was balanced by resolve. The thought that thousands of people had safely performed their first skydive at this very drop zone gave me the conviction to move forward. If they could do it, I could do it!

My jumpmaster had followed me out the door and stretched himself along the wing strut. He had his arm wrapped around the strut for stability and thrust his face within a foot or so of mine. "Are you ready?" he yelled. "YEAH!!!!!" I screamed back at him, embracing the adrenaline of the moment and steeling myself for the task ahead. "LOOK UP!" I turned my head forward and arched my neck. "GO!!!" he yelled. I held my breath and let go. It was an unforgettable instant in time, truly a leap of faith. Gravity and the wind ripped my body down and away from the plane on a parabolic arc, and I was overwhelmed with unfamiliar sensations. Time and space seemed to bend around me, and I felt like I was floating on a cushion of air. After what seemed like a long time, but was actually about one or two seconds, I began to sense that something wasn't right. My course instructor had assured us numerous times that we would feel like we were flying rather than falling. However, my senses told me that I was starting to fall onto my back. Time stood still; with detached curiosity, I asked myself, "What had I done to lose proper body position?"

My instructor had deployed my pilot chute on exit, and right on cue, my canopy began inflating. Film footage from a wing mounted camera later confirmed that I had exited the plane with perfect body position and began flailing my arms almost immediately. I had done what is referred to as "giving up on my arch". Having never experienced the sensation of a parachute jump, I had reacted instinctively rather than trusting the laws of physics. Nevertheless, I was safely hanging under a beautiful, fully inflated canopy. I felt a triumphant sense of pride, joy and elation. I could hardly believe what I had done!

I performed a control check to ensure that my canopy was indeed functioning correctly. I let out a yell which I'm sure was heard by the spectators on the ground, and heard Lyal greet me on the radio. "Jumper number one, welcome to skydiving! Turn ninety degrees to your right so I know that you can hear me." I followed his instructions, after which he informed me that I was in a good holding area and could experiment with turns as long as I stayed in the same location. I pulled my right steering toggle all the way down to my waist and held it there, which put me in a right spiral. After two complete revolutions I quickly raised my hand back above my head and recovered from the turn. It was a gleeful feeling to have control over the situation again. It was also remarkably peaceful. I marveled at the sight of the ground two thousand feet below me. It was surreal. I had never felt so alive!

As I reached one thousand feet above the ground, Lyal spoke to me again on the radio and informed me that I needed to make a heading change. I made the necessary turn and began my landing pattern. After two more ninety–degree turns, he guided me in for a perfect standup landing. My first solo skydive was over. The

instant my feet touched the earth I was struck by an intense longing to repeat the experience. Lyal greeted me out on the landing area with a smile that almost matched my own. "How was that?" he asked. "Unbelievable!" I replied. I could tell that he loved his business and never got tired of sharing the excitement of skydiving with new students.

I gathered up my parachute just as I had been taught to do and headed back in to drop it on the packing mat. Immediately, I returned to the manifest office to inquire about the possibility of doing another jump. Unfortunately, the wait would be long as there were many other eager jumpers manifested before me. I had not anticipated being there long and had plans for later. Nonetheless, I was hooked. As I said goodbye that day, I vowed that I would return to complete the Accelerated Freefall Course. The journey had begun.

Inquiring into the story

The story begins with indications of an increased commitment level. I had sacrificed sleep to make it to this course early in the morning and was greeted by foul weather and a reluctant instructor. The inclement weather had a welcome effect; although outwardly disappointed, I was somewhat relieved that the actual jump was postponed. This was a minor inconvenience, but allowed me to relax and focus on the classroom material. The quirky behavior of the instructor did not dampen my enthusiasm as much as the fatigue from sleep deprivation.

I proudly endured these elements as necessary parts of the experience. After all, the First Jump Course was a rite of passage. I considered this to be the beginning of my skydiving career, because the completion of this course was the necessary first

step in moving on to Advanced Freefall training. After the tandem, I knew that I was committed to getting involved in this sport, and the course was the prerequisite to everything that lay ahead.

Like the tandem skydive a month earlier, this jump had elements of a "first time" experience. This time, I would not be harnessed to an instructor. I would be wearing my own parachute. I would climb out on the wing all alone, perform the exit and canopy assessment, fly, and land the parachute with nothing more than verbal instructions from the ground. There would be a much greater level of control and responsibility in my hands. While I relished being in charge of my own fate, this jump required knowledge, skill and concentration that had been irrelevant as a tandem passenger.

As such, the anxiety and uncertainty were significant factors in this experience. Just as important, if not more so, was the intense eagerness, anticipation and enthusiasm I felt during this event. An internal struggle ensued between the desire for thrilling adventure and the fear of the unknown. I did not fear for my life. Nonetheless, the anxiety I felt that day was significant. I was grateful for the night's sleep that separated my ground school from the actual jump.

The morning brought sunshine, as well as a renewed feeling of hope and optimism. A short drive to the drop zone was all that separated me from destiny. As I drove, the internal struggle between anxiety and anticipation began. With full awareness and intent, I was about to take a huge leap of faith into the unknown. The training and all other formalities were over. Finally, it was time to become a skydiver, and I was doing it alone. This time I had no companion with which to share my

feelings of mortality. This factor added to a burgeoning sense of pride at having followed through on a commitment to myself, in spite of my friend's inability to take part in the experience.

Donning the jumpsuit and skydiving gear marked a change in identity. In particular, being fitted in my own parachute rig allowed me to become a skydiver. Obviously, the rig was necessary for survival. However, it served an important role in the experience from the moment I put it on. Despite my nerves and anxiety, the gear-up ritual solidified a feeling of readiness and gave me the confidence to move forward.

The jump itself contained several elements that had been missing in the tandem experience. The climb to altitude was much faster, which afforded me less time to prepare mentally but also less time to think and worry about the impending skydive. The Jumpmaster took his job very seriously and spoke very little, other than to bark orders at me. The following summer when I continued skydiving, I learned that he had just finished the Jumpmaster course a short time before. Thus, his curt and forceful demeanor, although somewhat unsettling, was understandable. In addition, there was a stark feeling of aloneness that struck me the moment I was told to climb out of the door. This magnified the seriousness of what I was doing, and that there was no turning back- at least not without losing face.

The force of the wind drove home the reality of what was happening, but I performed the climb out with authority and commitment in spite of my fear. It was comforting to take charge of the things I could control. I had chosen to do this, and I intended to stay focused. As I hung from the strut, my contact with the airplane was

suddenly reduced to mere hand-holds. My Jumpmaster literally extended himself out to me for encouragement and direction. His face, directly in front of mine, was the last remaining thread of contact with humanity. Letting go on command, I felt as though I had passed into another dimension, just as I had on exit during my tandem. Time stood still, and an instant stretched on and on. Flailing to correct my already appropriate body position was a minor error. Suddenly, I was hanging under a perfect canopy, and the final phase of the jump began.

Landing my parachute brought intense satisfaction, but also an instant longing. My return to earth brought a myriad of strong emotions. Simultaneously, I felt euphoria, awe, gratitude, humility and a powerful resolve to continue with the sport. There was a sense of great pride at having accomplished something that many speak of but few ever do. Rising to this challenge brought me to a state of being totally engaged physically, mentally and emotionally. It was multidimensional challenge and a state of being that I had never experienced. I felt alive in a way I had never before, and I wanted to repeat this experience again and again.

Chapter 5

Student and Novice Experiences

The narratives in this chapter focus on the next phase of my skydiving career. The summer after my First Jump Course, I completed one more solo Instructor Assisted Deployment, after which I immediately progressed to AFF (Advanced Freefall). These stories describe the dynamics of dealing with some of the challenges I faced, as well as the triumphs I experienced.

The first story begins when I was still in the student phase. In this narrative, I progress through the solo stage into the novice level. I describe in detail the anxiety I felt regarding the exit from the aircraft during those phases in my career. This was a significant mental block for me, such that the resulting anxiety made it difficult to perform up to my potential. The triumph over this fear was a significant turning point in my skydiving career which is highlighted at the end of this story.

The final narrative in this chapter takes place during my first jump in Arizona. I had not jumped in ten weeks, was at a drop zone I had never visited and was confronted with a number of foreign elements. However, the confidence I had gained by my earlier triumph carried me through a successful skydive. It was not only a validation of the growth I had experienced the summer before, it was to be the beginning of the next phase – the intermediate level.

The Sky Cracked

Jump #7 – It's 8 am and I'm lying awake in bed. Even though I'm exhausted from working until 3 am last night, I can't sleep. My mind is overwhelmed with thoughts of the coming day. I feel a mixture of emotions ranging from excitement and

anticipation to nervousness and anxiety. I feel like I used to on the morning of a tournament, confident that I could win but afraid to fail.

I have a right to be nervous. I'm going skydiving today, and although it's not the first time it is still a very new experience for me. I know what to expect in freefall, yet the very thought of jumping out of a perfectly good aircraft is more than a little unsettling. For some reason, I cannot overcome a formidable sense of discomfort every time I exit the plane. This feeling persists, even though the freefall and canopy ride are always pure bliss.

Perhaps the tension I feel is because there are few such opportunities in life to face one's fears so dramatically. A coworker, who adamantly stated that she would NEVER skydive, recently asked me, with no small amount of dismay, "Why on earth do you do it?" I searched my mind for an answer that would impact her and somehow convey the powerful experience of skydiving from the mouth of a beginner. I responded by stating, "It's like you're totally out of control, yet it's the ultimate feeling of control." She smiled and shook her head at my foolhardiness. I think we both knew that she was only reinforcing my commitment. Such attention was a source of pride which somehow solidified in me that I was doing something truly unique and extraordinary. However, when the moment of truth arrived and the door of the plane was opened, I was always alone. In that instant, it was up to me to face my fear and exit in spite of it.

It's time to get up. I know the precious few minutes before my alarm goes off are not going to grant me rest from my nagging thoughts, let alone any amount of

sleep. I need to get on my feet and take charge of the day. Being active always helps me to feel confident and in control of my mind.

I'm driving out to the drop zone now, even more aware of the approaching event. The inexorable march of time takes me closer to my scheduled training jump, just as my car takes me down the highway closer to the DZ with each passing moment. For what seems like no particular reason I'm feeling overwhelmed again, and butterflies creep into my stomach. Briefly, I question my need to step so far outside my comfort zone into an abyss of uncertainty. After all, the leap of faith required to trust a rented parachute and some instructors I hardly know is a monumental one. These thoughts lurk beneath the surface and normally go unacknowledged, but I know that connecting with them allows me to take control of my emotions.

The unsettled feeling passes. I look up at the beautiful blue sky and grin to myself. I'm learning to control the fear. Part of me wants to prove to myself and my coaches that I've got what it takes to handle the soft underbelly of human emotions that every normal person experiences jumping out of a plane. But that's not really what drives me. I am motivated by the feelings of joy and intense satisfaction that can only be understood by following this passion. In my embryonic skydiving career, I've had several of what Maslow would describe as peak experiences. By his definition, such powerful occurrences are rare, coming only two or three times over the course of one's lifetime. I believe Maslow thought that way because he wasn't a skydiver. Even though he was one of history's wisest scholars in the field of human development, he could never understand what I'm about to do. I'm excited now. I can't wait!

I'm in the airplane now, two miles above the earth. I try to focus on the task at hand, but tension fills my body. The exit is only a few seconds away, and like the unacknowledged thoughts lurking in my mind earlier, it must be confronted. My instructor watches the ground to determine our location. When we are at the appropriate spot to begin our climb out, he turns to the pilot and nods. The pilot reaches over and unlatches the door, pushing it outwards. The sky cracks open and a sudden blast of wind invades the cabin. My body stiffens. Once again I feel as though nothing could prepare me for this moment. I am acting on total faith as I step out into the wind and clutch the wing strut with all my strength. I look into the calm face of my instructor, take a deep breath and nod. As I feel my adrenaline surging, I smile broadly and part of my consciousness embraces the moment at hand. One, two, three! We step off into the sky and there is a moment of sensory overload, yet I feel elation. An instant stretches on and on; the cathartic release of adrenaline is more than symbolic. The sky has embraced me again, and the feeling is so welcoming. I feel secure and in control again. The intense roar of the wind with the sensation of freefalling is captivating, and once again I feel so completely in the moment that nothing else exists. I have transcended the mundane to step into another dimension, and have been granted a rare, privileged glimpse at life. I am truly free; free to walk among the clouds for a fleeting instant.

Jump # 13 – This is my fifth jump since graduating the Advanced Freefall Course. My goal this summer was simply to finish AFF, but I've already gone beyond that to become a nationally certified Solo Skydiver. It has been an amazing experience, rich with rewards and satisfaction beyond my greatest expectations. Yet I

am very overwhelmed by the unexpected feeling of aloneness that I carry with me while jumping solo. While I was a student skydiver, I anticipated a greater sense of freedom to come with Solo status, but that freedom has brought with it a much greater level of responsibility. Although I know I'm competent and capable of making safe decisions, I miss the interaction, feedback and camaraderie that come when jumping with a coach.

Today I've decided to hire a cameraman to jump with me and capture the experience on film. We're climbing to altitude and I'm nervous. I mention the feeling of being left on my own and the fact that this surprises me. Aidan, my cameraman, assures me that this is the norm for all jumpers just off student status. I find some comfort in that, but have a hard time focusing on what we are about to do.

We're on jump run now, and I'm somewhat unsure. I have planned to do a few 360's for the camera, followed by a front loop and back loop. I have done all this before and I know it's a simple sequence, but I feel a lot of self imposed pressure to perform well. As the door is opened, I feel that familiar dread that momentarily supercedes the freefall. My body stiffens and my breath nearly stops, as though forgotten. Aidan climbs out onto the strut and positions himself on the tire as I get ready to perform a dive exit. I look at him to check his readiness and see that he is staring intently at me and the red light on his video camera is on. My every move is being captured. I give an unconvincing yell for bravado and execute the count. Rock forward, back, dive out! Time is frozen the instant I lose contact with the plane. The intense mix of adrenaline, excitement and anxiety drives my arousal state into over the edge, and synapses in my brain misfire. I hold my breath, staring blankly into

nothingness, and wait. An uneasy feeling creeps into my consciousness, telling me I have lost control. I flail hopelessly for stability. Though my movements are futile, taking action has awakened me from a surreal dream. I can salvage this skydive! I laugh at myself and search around for my cameraman. Turning to face him, I engage in the thrill and the ecstasy of the moment. I am in freefall and nothing else matters. I absolutely love it. It's time to play for the camera!

Jump # 23 - It is late October and the season is nearly over. I have never completed three skydives in one day, but I am about to do so. I am thrilled with my progress. I could never have imagined achieving the two-way endorsement in the course of my first season, but that is exactly what I just accomplished on the previous skydive. I had been racing against Mother Nature to achieve this goal; the skydiving season would be ending after one more weekend of jumping. It was a fantastic way to end the year for me. Finally, the time has come where I can jump with someone else without paying them.

Audrey is a veteran of nearly one thousand jumps who I barely know, yet she was one of the first to congratulate me. She has agreed to go up with me and coach me on some simple turns and docks, which will help me in the future for group skydiving. I feel tremendous satisfaction from today's accomplishment. A weight has been lifted and the pressure is off. I feel confident, relaxed and ready. This jump is going to be fun!

We're seconds away from exit. The air is very cold at this altitude and we brace for the frigid blast of wind. Just as on all my previous skydives, I have a sense of excitement and anticipation. However, something is different this time. The spike

of anxiety that normally reaches its peak at this moment is noticeably absent. I feel nothing but enthusiasm and excitement for what we are about to do. It is an unusual but welcome experience to face the impending exit with such eagerness. For the first time, I feel truly in my element.

The blast of cold air is welcome this time, as though the sky is reaching into the plane to greet us. Audrey looks down at the ground two miles below to determine the proper time for our climb out. She then looks at me calmly and steps out onto the landing gear, adjusting her position for stability. Simultaneously, I extend my left foot out and firmly place it on the step while grasping the rear of the door frame with my right hand. I'm on my right knee, ready to spring forward and dive out of the plane after her. She is ready. Her face is inches from mine, our eyes locked together. She wears a full face helmet, similar to the type worn by motorcycle riders or snowmobilers, which covers her mouth. This has the effect of intensifying her stare, linking us together psychically.

I'm tingling with anticipation. My awareness is broad and deep, and I feel connected with my partner, connected with this moment. I am in control. There is no abyss, no uncertainty. The sky is open, beckoning, welcoming. All we need to do is step off into the cushion of air that waits.

My eyes remain locked with hers as she executes the count, One, two, three and she's away. A split second later I follow, my eyes never leaving hers, and stretch out into a dive as she falls away from the plane. The laws of physics separate us momentarily, but her stare keeps me locked on course like a guided missile. As I move towards her to make our first dock, I revel in this sense of awakening. As

always, I am ecstatic to be in freefall, but unlike my previous twenty two skydives, I did not just fall into this time and space as though awakening from a surreal dream. Intent and action were one; I stepped into this dimension fully engaged and now have a renewed level of perception. I am connected to time and space in a way I have never experienced.

As I cover the distance and dock with my partner, she returns my broad grin. Does she know what I am experiencing? There is no way for her to know what changes have happened in my consciousness, but she knows I am thrilled. She continues to grin back at me, and I wonder if she is entertained by my child-like enthusiasm. In any event, she seems to be enjoying herself. Her expression tells me we are performing well. This exercise is extremely simple for her, and I am grateful to her for being there to challenge and guide me. Indeed, I am grateful to have shared these moments with someone who has been through this stage. I think she understands.

Inquiring into the stories

This narrative consists of three short stories that serve as "snapshots", documenting my progress through the student and novice stages. The first story is about my seventh skydive and the tension leading up to the jump. At this point in my career, skill acquisition had begun. I had repeatedly experienced the joy and satisfaction of accomplishing the tasks presented to me by my coaches. With great pride, I had adopted a series of rituals revolving around my weekend trips to the drop zone and my skydiving activities. My identity as a skydiver was actively being constructed, as jumping had become a central feature in my life. Yet despite my

intense passion and commitment to the sport, the anxiety I had struggled with before and during my first two skydives continued to be a significant component of the experience.

During the student, solo and novice stages of my career, the exit from the aircraft was a significant source of this anxiety. Both figuratively and literally, the opening of the door and my stepping through it represented a huge barrier for me. There was a violent, unnatural element to the procedure when the pilot reached over, unlatched the door and shoved it open. Not surprisingly, each exit I performed coincided with a cathartic build-up and release of anxiety and emotional tension. The tension around exiting the airplane is the focal point of these three stories.

The first story takes place while I was still in the AFF program learning basic freefall skills. An internal struggle between excitement and anxiety builds until the moment when the door of the plane is opened. Suddenly, fear takes center stage and tension fills my body. The barrier between the security of the aircraft cabin and the thrills of freefall must be crossed, lest I disappoint myself and my instructor. In reality, there is no doubt in my mind that I AM going to exit the plane, but I want to do so with resolve and with correct technique. We have only a few seconds to be out the door if we are to going to land our parachutes on the drop zone. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, I am being graded on my performance and have a strong desire to do well so I can move on to the next stage in my training with confidence.

I perform my exit just as planned. The act of stepping through that barrier into freefall carries intrinsic satisfaction, simply for having overcome my fear once again. In addition, the rewards of freefall are huge. Intense sensory stimulation, freedom of

movement and self actualization make this an experience like no other. This positive self-regard is solidified by the unspoken statement that, once again, I have taken a step out of the ordinary to do something most people wouldn't dare.

The second jump covered in this narrative took place several weeks later after I had finished not only the AFF program but also my Solo Certification. Already I had progressed beyond my expectations for that season, but was unsure as to whether time would allow me to continue until the drop zone closed. Only one month remained until the end of the season, so I had decided to hire a cameraman for this jump. I had never been filmed skydiving before and wanted to be able to share the experience with friends and family.

The addition of the cameraman added a level of pressure on top of what was already a nerve-wracking experience. As the plane made its ascent, familiar feelings of anxiety began to build. In fact, the normal pre-jump excitement and anticipation gave way somewhat to an elevated level of nervousness.

As always, anxiety reached its peak as the pilot opened the door. Video footage of me in the plane clearly showed physical tension as the cameraman climbed out the door past me. The instant I exit the aircraft illustrates my overloaded mental state. Momentarily frozen, I tumble and flail helplessly for a few seconds until righting myself and continuing my performance. A mistake was made, but, as always, the thrill of freefall brings a smile to my face. The remainder of the skydive is exploration of my three dimensional playground.

The third story centers on a major accomplishment. Unexpectedly, I had been able to continue skydiving until the end of the season and had progressed well beyond

my expectations. The day of this particular skydive, I had just received the endorsement to perform two-way jumps with other skydivers. My confidence level was at an all-time high and I was more relaxed than ever. This mental state led to an unexpected but most welcome breakthrough. An experienced jumper named Audrey, whom I hardly knew, agreed to accompany me on this skydive. The mood was relaxed and I felt little pressure to perform. As the plane climbed to altitude, I remained relaxed. Anticipation and excitement grew, while the normal anxiety, for the most part, remained at bay.

As the door of the plane opened, the barrier between the cabin and the sky was non-existent. This was a completely different experience from all my previous skydives, an exponential leap in conscious awareness. It was difficult to fathom, but the fear I was accustomed to feeling at that instant had melted away in favor of eager anticipation. I would describe the feeling as giddiness; except for the fact that I was intently focused on performing well on this skydive. As we exited the plane and performed our first dock, I was impacted by familiar, welcome sensations. This time, I felt a new level of satisfaction at my progress and tremendous gratitude towards my partner for helping me test my skills and celebrate my accomplishment. This was a major breakthrough and a turning point in my skydiving career.

First Arizona Jump

I'm standing on the tarmac in the warm, late afternoon sun, anxiously awaiting the arrival of our jump aircraft. It is early January, but I am in Arizona. A trickle of perspiration rolls down my cheek and its descent is halted by the arid breeze. I pull off my helmet, wipe my brow and chuckle to myself. I know that the

sweat on my face is more a product of the butterflies in my stomach than the desert heat. I gaze upwards at the clear blue sky, take a deep breath and close my eyes. Despite the fact that I have carried out this surreal performance twenty five times in the last six months, I am experiencing a familiar reaction: fight or flight. Part of my brain is yelling at me, forcefully reminding me, "You don't have to do this!" I smile inwardly and muse to myself, "Why would any sane person do this?" At that point, another thought overrides the conversation. A feeling of clarity takes over and a smile crosses my face. I remind myself that, indeed, any sane person would feel a stress reaction when they are about to jump out of an aircraft two and a half miles above the earth. What I am feeling is an ordinary response to danger; a survival instinct which is necessary to keep me alert and keep me alive.

I am brought back into the moment by the sudden propeller noise of our twin otter, which has just finished its refueling one hundred meters behind us. The plane lurches forward and makes its way down the taxiway towards our group of two dozen eager skydivers. As the aircraft turns and stops for boarding, an experienced jumper picks up a metal ladder off the pavement and braces it against the bottom of the doorway. We file into the plane as efficiently as possible and jam ourselves into predetermined spots on long bench seats which run along each side of the spartan interior cabin. Before the last jumper is seated, the plane is moving again, and within ninety seconds we are airborne.

The climb to altitude is much more rapid than I am accustomed to. Like most skydivers, I belong to a smaller drop zone and normally jump out of Cessna aircraft, which carry five or six jumpers at once and take twenty minutes or more to reach a

standard exit altitude of eleven thousand feet AGL (above ground level). Here at Skydive Arizona, three twin otters and three skyvans can accommodate twenty four to twenty six jumpers each, and climb to thirteen thousand feet in less than fifteen minutes. Whether a skydiver comes here to train for competition, or simply to jump for fun, the larger aircraft are of huge benefit in allowing a person to jump much more frequently than if they were jumping out of Cessna aircraft. In addition, the extra two thousand feet of altitude allows jumpers to cram in ten to twelve seconds more freefall time in every jump. Throughout the world of sport parachuting, Skydive Arizona is known as one of the best drop zones on the planet for good reason. Indeed, this place is a skydiver's dream come true! Looking around, I see a large number of unfamiliar faces, some of which have traveled from as far as Eastern Europe to train here. The family atmosphere at my home drop zone in central Alberta is such a contrast that I feel a strange sense of anonymity now. I am slightly unsettled by the lack of familiarity, but I know that the experience gained over the next two weeks is going to be invaluable. Besides, feeling uncomfortable has never stopped me from doing this before.

I am aware that, with a scant twenty five jumps under my belt, I am quite likely the least experienced skydiver on this load. I see calmness and confidence in the faces around me, and marvel for an instant that some of the most experienced skydivers are so relaxed that they even appear to be bored. Intellectually, I understand that these jumpers are focused on the process of managing their emotions and arousal levels. Skydiving instructors speak incessantly on the critical importance of mental preparation before and during the climb to altitude. However, I can't help but wonder

whether or not I am alone in feeling anxious and nervous. Rather than being intellectual or philosophical about my emotions, I decide to embrace them. After all, jumping out of a plane has little to do with intellect and logic. That is why I am so passionate about the sport.

A few minutes have passed. I check my wrist altimeter and see that we have reached an altitude of five thousand feet. I close my eyes and take three slow, deep breaths to calm my mind and prepare myself for the task at hand. I am moving into the doorway with Pete, my friend and coach for this jump, taking exit position, and launching myself into the air with him in a tight, free flown formation. I visualize a series of maneuvers in which he separates himself from me vertically and horizontally in order to test my ability. In a three dimensional game of cat and mouse, I chase him around the sky, smoothly close the distance and perform a dock, much like two space craft in orbit. We carry out this brief performance three times, at which point we have reached break off altitude. We now have five to seven seconds to achieve maximum horizontal separation from each other to ensure safe, unobstructed deployment of our parachutes. We wave abruptly at each other, turn and track away. I flare out of the track to stop any horizontal movement and ensure stability during the deployment sequence. Smoothly and abruptly, I reach for my pilot chute and forcefully throw it sideways into the wind.

Within a second I feel the snatch force of my canopy being yanked out of its container, and moments later, the opening shock of my parachute deploying. But something is not right. I quickly look up and instantly recognize that my parachute, which should be rectangular and inflated, is deformed on one side by twisted lines.

Simultaneously, I feel the rapid onset of a violent spiral, a situation which will result in a fatal impact with the ground in less than one minute if I fail to react. Calmly, I look down at my harness and locate my cut away and reserve handles. I quickly grasp them, one in each hand, as my spiral accelerates out of control and the G-force begins to build. Punch right; I rip my cutaway handle loose, and for an instant I'm tumbling in free fall again. Punch left; I tear my reserve handle free of its Velcro mooring and arch my body! I look up at a white reserve canopy, calmly unzip my jumpsuit and stuff the handles inside. I zip up again and grasp the steering toggles in each hand to take control of my life saving reserve parachute.

Pete's elbow in my ribs brings me back to the present reality. I open my eyes and, feeling somewhat more relaxed and confident, give my friend thumbs up. "Tell me about our skydive." He is asking me to verbally describe the details of the jump we are about to perform in order to test my memory and help keep me focused. We will be freefalling at over one hundred and twenty miles per hour, and things will be happening fast. Precious seconds will be saved by anticipating planned maneuvers in advance.

I paint a visual picture of what we are about to do. "OK. We squat in the doorway facing each other. I put my right hand on your shoulder; on three, you go out poised and I dive after you....." I recount the details of our planned skydive. We discuss several key focal points, such as the coordination of our movements on exit, which will determine the success of our endeavor. I nod, I listen, and I clear my mind of extraneous thoughts that will interfere with my performance. Decades of competing in martial arts has taught me two things. One, I have learned to truly

appreciate the wisdom of a good coach. I know that I must trust him implicitly, and that doing so will help me remove uncertainty and doubt from my mind. Two, I have learned that, in the moment of truth, focusing on one or two simple things will keep me from being overwhelmed and make a significant difference in my performance. There will be many factors to consider, but he has narrowed it down to two or three key points. I feel confident and ready.

The plane turns north and we are now on jump run. I check my altimeter and confirm that we are at thirteen thousand feet. In the back of the plane, a yellow light switches on and someone yells, "Door!" Two experienced jumpers at the back of the plane reach down and slide the dirty, plastic shudder upwards until it clears the entrance way. Seconds later, the yellow light switches off and is replaced by a bright green one. Immediately, the jumpers next to the door take their place, nod to each other and launch themselves into the air. As other groups perform the same feat in a controlled, orderly fashion, I anticipate our rapidly approaching moment of truth. It will be critical that we wait at least seven seconds after the preceding group of jumpers to ensure adequate separation. But we must be exit promptly on cue or we will delay the jumpers who follow us out of the aircraft. My heart is pounding now, and I feel the adrenaline begin to course through my veins. One last group and it is now our turn.

Quickly we move into position and brace ourselves. We lock eyes, take a deep breath and nod to each other to indicate readiness. Pete looks calm and relaxed, while I feel naked, exposed and barely in control. Yet with eager anticipation I am grinning broadly and feeling almost ecstatic. In spite of all the nerves and anxiety, I know that

when we are free of the aircraft all doubts will be gone. I am coiled and ready. I live for this moment! We perform a coordinated rocking motion to establish our count. One, two, THREE....we launch ourselves into the sky and are free!

Instantly, the laws of physics take over and I am flipped on my side as the relative wind slams into my chest. We are "coming down the hill" now, falling in a parabolic arc as we approach terminal velocity. I lose sight of my partner for a few seconds as lateral force from my push off causes me to do an unplanned turn. No problem. I quickly realize that I am too tense, and take a deep breath to relax. I counteract the rotation I have created by turning in the opposite direction, and stop when I am facing him. I smile as I gain control over my body. As our fall rate (and consequently, the wind velocity) increases, subtle movements of the limbs have a greater and greater effect. As we reach terminal velocity, we are face to face in a belly- to- earth formation and I extend my legs to close the distance. Smoothly, I perform a dock by grasping his wrists. I release my grip and he quickly backs off to take a position ten feet or so in front and three feet below me. I arch my body harder to accelerate my fall rate, match his level in the sky, and move forward to dock again. We perform this sequence twice more in the next thirty seconds while carefully monitoring our altitude. We are plummeting to the earth at a rate of one thousand feet every five or six seconds. Therefore, it is much more critical that we deploy our parachutes at the proper altitude than we attempt to squeeze a few more seconds of work into our skydive. At five thousand feet we wave, turn and track away from each other. I flare out of the track by tucking up my heals and extending my arms out in

front of my face. Reaching back with my right hand, I find my pilot chute handle and yank it out of its container, tossing it into the unobstructed air flow beside me.

I am rapidly greeted by the welcome feeling of opening shock. Unlike my mental rehearsal earlier, I look up to see a perfectly rectangular, inflated canopy. It is a beautiful sight, framed by the bright blue, cloudless Arizona sky. I grasp the steering toggles and perform a control check to ensure that I will be able to fly and safely land my parachute. As I do this, I laugh gleefully and soak in the exhilaration of the moment. This skydive was as "perfect" as could be expected. It was my first jump at an unfamiliar drop zone, and the main objectives where accomplished. It is a great feeling of satisfaction to have performed so well on my first jump in more than two months. I will remain here in Arizona for the next two weeks with a large contingent of skydivers from all over Canada and Alaska. There will be many, many more chances to test and improve my skill.

Inquiring into the story

The skydiving experience described in this narrative highlights several new challenges. This jump was my first at Skydive Arizona, and there were several elements inherent in jumping at a new drop zone that contributed to increased pressure. First, I had not jumped in several months and felt somewhat rusty. Second, I did not know what it would be like to exit through the door of a much larger aircraft that did not have landing gear to climb out on. Third, the aircraft carried two dozen skydivers, so canopy traffic over the landing area would be much greater than I was accustomed to. Fourth, the large number of unfamiliar skydivers on this load led to a

discomforting feeling of anonymity. I was used to jumping with people I had become friends with rather than a crowd of unfamiliar faces.

Nevertheless, the accomplishments of my previous season had fueled my confidence and, although I felt somewhat nervous on this jump, I did not feel out of place. I had learned some preparatory skills which helped put nerves in perspective. Nervousness was now a welcome companion, one that would keep me alert and in a state of readiness. Inexperience was a factor in this jump, but not nearly as significant as earlier in my career.

Despite this being my first jump in several months, I wanted to continue right where I left off. I hired a coach to guide me, and he presented me with a series of challenges that would assess my capability to pass the next test in my career – the group endorsement. This milestone was the primary goal for my two weeks in Arizona, as the group endorsement, or B CoP, was the ticket to skydiving with groups of people. Like all junior skydivers, I looked forward to this milestone and worked towards it as the most significant accomplishment one could achieve as a novice.

During the climb to altitude, an important element of skydiving is explored in detail – the mental rehearsal. This is a visualization practice taught to all skydivers in the beginning stages of their careers. A perfect performance imagined in real time is interrupted by a parachute malfunction, which leads the reader to question what is actually happening. Suddenly, we are brought back into the present moment by the words of my coach, who asks for descriptions of the planned skydive. After I tell the story in advance, the time has come to make it happen.

Like actors in a well–choreographed fight scene, the jumpers ahead of us perform their exodus from the plane with timing and precision. I am surprised by the fluidity of their movements which lead up to our rapidly approaching moment of truth. Right on cue, my coach and I take our places in the doorway and step into the sky. Our three – dimensional play ensues and the objectives for the skydive are successfully met. I celebrate a very positive beginning to my skydiving holiday.

The breakthrough described during the previous narrative had a significant impact on this skydive. Increased confidence earned through my late – season accomplishments remained, even after a two month layoff. This resulted in a solid performance, despite a miscue made on exit. Furthermore, I was able to rise to the challenge and perform all planned tasks in spite of the new elements of a foreign, much larger drop zone.

These changes represented a paradigm shift in terms of how I saw myself in the sport. Extreme tension and uncertainty were common states in the student and solo stages of my career. The day I achieved my two – way endorsement, which meant I was officially a "novice", I had made a breakthrough in controlling that fear. Emotional tension regarding the general fear of "jumping out of a plane" was now largely replaced by anxiety related more to my performance. This paradigm shift was instrumental to my development over the coming days.

Chapter 6

The Cutaway

The four stories in this chapter center around one of the most powerful events in my skydiving career – my first parachute malfunction. This event occurred relatively early in my career while I was in Arizona for the first time. It happened on my thirty ninth skydive when I was still considered a novice. The fact that I was still a beginner and yet handled the mishap with calmness and professionalism was a great source of pride. However, innocence was lost in the wake of this event due to a new awareness of my own mortality.

The unique approach I took to learning how to pack parachutes is examined, and a link between incorrect packing techniques and canopy malfunction is established. As I successfully negotiate the mishap and emerge as a hero in my own dramatic play, a third party emerges and brings home the realization that I was fully responsible and need to be aware of that fact. The tension that builds within over the next few days manifests itself in unusual ways. I find myself having difficulty correctly deploying my parachute, and this creates a point of catharsis where I am forced to examine my thoughts and emotions about the malfunction. Through self examination I am able to resolve this unnecessary guilt and anxiety. This allows me to grow from the experience and rekindle the passion I feel for the sport.

Packing my own Malfunction

One of the most frustrating things about being a novice skydiver is that you are left alone to supervise your own skill development, yet you still need help with a lot of things. As you progress beyond student status, you are expected to be more and

more independent. Although senior jumpers always watch out for those with less experience, the learning environment at the drop zone becomes more informal and less structured. So when a novice wants to learn a new skill, he or she must ask a coach or a senior jumper for guidance. Generally, that person will be happy to help, as long as he or she is not already busy with something else.

Learning to pack parachutes is no exception. To be legally certified to pack without supervision, one must complete ten pack jobs supervised by a coach, as well as a practical exam. These pack jobs can be done as part of an evening course, or they can be completed in a less formal environment, such as between jumps during a regular day of skydiving. Packing is usually learned during or right after one completes the AFF (Advanced Free Fall) Course – in other words, the beginning stages of learning to skydive. Packing your own parachute after a jump is an important step in becoming an independent skydiver.

In my case, I had an evening job throughout my first season of skydiving. This meant that I was usually rushed to complete my planned jumps and get back to the city for work at 5 pm. Thus, I had little time available to learn and practice the art of packing parachutes. The formal course is offered infrequently, so that was not an option for me either. The result was that I spent my entire first season of skydiving, in which I completed twenty five jumps, without learning how to pack. I was shown only once, but soon forgot the technique as time passed.

It was frustrating for me to be well beyond student status and yet so far behind other jumpers in this area. I was eager to be independent and self-reliant as soon as possible, and having others pack for me was annoying. In some cases, a person with

fewer jumps and less experience than I had would step in when I dropped my rig on the packing mat after a jump and go to work. On those occasions where I had some spare time to do it myself, I could never find a qualified coach to teach and supervise me. So I accepted my situation and focused on developing other skydiving skills.

After the drop zone closed for the winter, I was restless to continue advancing my skills in any aspect of skydiving I could. Obviously, I was no longer able to jump, so I ordered a training DVD from a skydiving website which was a compilation of five instructional video programs. Each program focused on a different aspect of safety and instruction. Two of the programs were specifically devoted to packing parachutes, so I borrowed my friend's rig and went to work.

Learning how to pack from a video gave me a feeling of independence. I was able to remember some of the procedure from before, and the blanks were filled in by the demonstration on the DVD. This allowed me to practice repeatedly until I had committed the entire process to memory. I was making up for lost time and it gave me a feeling of pride.

Over the course of a few weeks I performed well in excess of ten pack jobs. Although they were unsupervised, I was confident in my ability because I could remember most segments of the hands–on instruction I had received during the summer. I was scheduled to go on a two week training camp in Arizona in early January, and I was excited about my newfound skill. Knowing how to pack would be a great asset in a place where I would likely be doing over fifty jumps in a short period of time.

The Cutaway

It's a beautiful morning in Arizona with a crystal blue sky and warm sunshine. It's 10 a.m., and the temperature is already nearly twenty degrees above zero. I am about to perform my thirty ninth skydive, and my confidence level is at an all time high. A friend, Trina, is going with me on a practice jump to help me hone the skills needed for my group endorsement. Anticipation is high. I feel a sense of eagerness and excitement that is, to some extent, often suppressed by nerves before skydiving. Trina's relaxed demeanor and warm smile helps melt away any pressure I may be feeling. This jump is going to be fun!

Our five minute call finds us ready with anticipation. We board the tram, a flat–deck wagon pulled by a rusty old pick–up truck, and enjoy a short ride over to the main hangar. The driver stops there to allow the remaining jumpers to climb aboard, and heads out to the tarmac to meet the incoming aircraft. We step off the tram and begin establishing our seating order for the upcoming load. Within a few short minutes, our airplane is parked in front of us. Having just landed from the previous load, she sits impatiently awaiting another group of skydivers. In orderly fashion and without delay we climb aboard. Within seconds the plane is airborne.

We are leveled off at 13,000 feet. It is now only moments before The Jump. As the last group before us exits, I begin counting and Trina moves into position. She has her back to the open tail gate and I face her, ready to charge forward like a wide receiver. We wait seven seconds to avoid any possibility of a mid-air collision with the group before us. Our eyes meet and I nod to signal my readiness. She steps backwards off the tail gate into the abyss below her, and I count – one-one thousand,

two; I spring forward and stretch my body into a dive position, my eyes never leaving her. Eye contact helps me make small heading corrections instinctively so that I may get down to her and dock in mid air as smoothly and quickly as possible. Like an Acapulco cliff diver, I stretch my arms out behind and arch my chest to cut wind resistance. She is below and in front of me, about two hundred feet away, and rapidly gaining speed. About ten seconds after exit, she is at terminal velocity and my streamlined delta dive brings me down to her smoothly. I dock with her by grasping her wrists, and we smile at each other. She backs away to create three dimensional space between us, and again I close the gap. We repeat this exercise twice more, and I feel a sense of pride at having completed a relatively ambitious skydive for someone at my level. There is a tacit understanding between us that Trina is doing me a favor to help me improve my skills. With over four hundred jumps to her credit, this exercise was hardly a test for her. I give her a huge smile of thanks and a triumphant "thumbs-up" as we check our altitude and realize that it is break-off time – 4,500 feet. We wave at each other, turn and track away.

After five seconds in a torpedo-like body position, I flare hard to retard my forward velocity. A quick check of my altimeter shows that I am passing through 3,500 feet. I reach back with my right hand, grasp my pilot chute handle and forcefully pitch it sideways into the air stream to my right. Almost instantly I realize something is wrong. Having felt the opening sequence of my parachute thirty eight times before, I know what sensations to expect. But this time, as my canopy bag gets pulled from its container, my left shoulder drops slightly and I remain in a belly-to-earth position. Normally, I would be yanked upright by the rapid deceleration brought

on by an inflating parachute, but this is not the case. Instantly, my brain recognizes that I am experiencing a malfunction known as a bag lock; the thick rubber bands along the edge of my canopy bag are still holding one or more of the line groups in place.

This situation is known as a high speed malfunction, and time is of the essence. I am fifteen seconds from impact and there is nothing to slow my fall rate. My training takes over. I do not waste even one second looking up to see what is above me. My eyes locate the emergency handles on the front of my harness. I grasp the red cutaway handle in my right hand and the silver D-ring reserve handle in my left. I rip the red handle loose, and my main canopy breaks away and disappears above me. Immediately I punch my left hand forward, yanking my reserve handle free, and arch my body again as my reserve springs off my back. Finally I am jerked upright by the rapid deceleration of a parachute opening above me! Intensely, I scrutinize the life-saving reserve canopy as it wrestles with the air. I watch it inflate properly. It is a shade of robin-egg blue that I shall never forget. I stare at it for a few moments, filled with gratitude and awe. I soak in this moment; for a few seconds, time stands still.

The impact of what just happened begins to hit me. I gaze in wonder at my clenched fists, each of which holds a life saving handle. In the face of a very real emergency, I had remembered to hold on to my cutaway and reserve handles. I had remained calm in the face of a life threatening malfunction, and I feel a combination of focused intensity and jubilation. "WAHOOOOOOOOO!!!!!" I scream to whoever will listen. I unzip my jumpsuit and stuff the handles inside. Realizing I am far from

the landing area and at a very low altitude, I quickly zip up again and grab my steering toggles. I have barely enough time to pick out a clearing in the middle of the sage brush, turn into the wind and land.

Safe on the ground, I grit my teeth and give another cathartic yell to the open desert. This is intense! I begin gathering up my canopy, and can't help the smile on my face: I feel like a proud little boy, eagerly awaiting the chance to tell my heroic tale to my companions back at the landing area. My mind begins to process the chain of events that just occurred, and I am aware that my hands are shaking. I am alone in the desert – a chance to reflect. Again with a sense of wonder, I feel the dry, packed ground under my feet. I feel slightly disoriented, but at the same time I am connected to the earth in a way that I have never felt before. I look up at the blue sky and feel grateful to be standing here. Indeed, I am grateful to be alive.

Inquiring into the story

In this story, we get a sense of hope and optimism. It is a beautiful, sunny day and I am about to perform a fun but challenging skydive. I am excited to be going up with a friend, rather than a paid coach. In itself, this is somewhat of a privilege. Although not addressed in this narrative, it is a frustrating fact for all novice skydivers that they must

spend a lot of time jumping alone to practice their skills, or pay an experienced, certified coach to jump with them, until they have a minimum of fifty skydives and have demonstrated all the required skills necessary to receive a Level B Certificate of Proficiency. Until one achieves this milestone, there are many limitations on the types of skydives that can be performed and the people that one can jump with. I am about

to perform a skydive which was to be a "dress rehearsal" of the jump required of me to achieve the group endorsement. The stage is set for me to prove to myself that I can pass the most important milestone in my skydiving career.

There is something else here that I hint at before the jump. There is a feeling of confidence brought on by the rapid accumulation of small accomplishments in the short time I had been at this training camp. This confidence has given me freedom from doubt and worry, and is allowing me to enjoy this experience rather than succumbing to the nerves and pressure often brought on by performance anxiety. After all, the world of skydiving is not a place to show weakness, and achieving higher social status is dependent upon skill acquisition. On this day, I have the opportunity to show my friend that I have what it takes to move to the next level.

As the narrative unfolds, my partner and I carry out our pre-rehearsed drama perfectly as planned. The climax happens with a feeling of triumphant satisfaction. Then, without warning, the anticlimactic canopy ride unravels into a potentially life–threatening event and a new drama unfolds. I am faced with an unexpected challenge and must deal with a situation I have never faced. The successful resolution of this conflict gives rise to a new achievement, and heightened feelings of pride and even omnipotence are experienced. On the one hand, I feel like a hero in an action movie - standing triumphant in the face of adversity. Yet in the aftermath of these events, I am humbled and even awed by the magnitude of what just happened. I have realized a whole new level of respect for the potential danger involved in skydiving. At the same time, I have experience a rite of passage – I have faced the most critical test a skydiver can face of survival instinct, and I have successfully passed the test.

Not only do we see a change in the skydiver, we see a change in the narrator as well. The chain of events provides the skydiver with a great deal of self confidence, self knowledge and success to build upon. At the same time, the story teller is given the gift of a rich tale to pass on, one that most story tellers would never have the opportunity to tell. Indeed, both the skydiver and the narrator have been shaped by the positive outcome of these events and their immediate aftermath.

Brandon's Revelation

I am standing out in the desert, my arms clutching the nylon fabric of the reserve parachute that just saved my life. I have just experienced my first reserve ride and I am slightly overwhelmed. A cascade of emotions well up inside me. Simultaneously, I feel awe, gratitude, jubilation, and pride. Most importantly, I am humbled by the immediacy and urgency of the laws of physics I have just experienced first hand.

The realization that I am all alone begins to sink in. This is a sharp contrast to the adrenaline – pumping action I was caught up in only moments ago. I am anxious to get out of my gear and debrief, not just to tell my "heroic tale" but to get feedback from my coaches and learn from this experience. As I begin contemplating the long walk back, I spot a trail of dust headed in my direction. An old, rusty Chevy van is rumbling towards me and I am genuinely shocked at how quickly the drop zone staff responded to my absence.

As the vehicle approaches, I see that the roof has been chopped off. This makes for easy access when picking up jumpers who are carrying an armful of parachute. The driver pulls up beside me and says, "Hop in." He is friendly, but

businesslike. Clearly this situation is routine to him. He extends his hand to me and offers an introduction. "I'm Brandon."

"My name's Kevin." I'm still trying to control the trembling in my arms and legs.

"Was that your first malfunction?" he asks nonchalantly. For a second, I wonder what led him to ask that question. Then I realize he must have noticed the student gear I am using. Obviously he is well aware of the fact that there are many inexperienced jumpers in our visiting group.

"Yup." I state proudly.

"What did you have?" He is already pulling away and heading in the direction from which he came.

"It was a bag lock." I am still feeling like a hero for maintaining such great control and composure in the face of an emergency.

"Oh yeah? Who packed it?"

His question brought me back to reality in a way that was emotionally deflating. In an instant, I came to the realization that I had directly caused this malfunction the night before when I packed my own parachute. I felt foolish, because I was still in the early stages of learning how to pack. In fact, I was not yet certified to do so alone. I should have had closer supervision from a coach, but it had been getting dark and those of us still packing, including coaches, were rushing to finish in the fading daylight. So I had completed my own pack job without supervision, confident that I had done everything correctly. Obviously, that was not the case.

"I did," I mumble, feeling disappointed and deflated. I sense that his question was designed with a purpose in mind. In the immediate aftermath of my first cutaway, he is using a valuable opportunity to make an important point.

"Everybody makes mistakes. The main thing is that you did the right thing when it counted." His reaction is comforting, not only because of his choice of words but because of his calmness as well.

We drive to the spot where I remembered seeing the bag fall to the earth. As we search the desert for the missing parachute, a positive thought occurs to me; the fact that it was trapped inside the bag protected it from dust and sagebrush. If a fully deployed canopy needs to be cut away, it may get snagged on power lines, trees, barbed wire, or something else that could cause damage to the fabric. A parachute that needs repairing can be expensive, and I am thankful I do not have to incur a major financial penalty for this malfunction!

We quickly find the canopy bag, as well as the reserve pilot chute, or freebag, and head back to the landing area. I am greeted by hugs, handshakes and back slaps from my comrades. There is a buzz around the landing area. This was the first malfunction of this training camp and now a hot topic of conversation. I find the majority of other jumpers are quick to brush it off as a valuable experience to be learned from. Many of the other novices and students in the group are somewhat awed by the news, and many wonder how they would handle a similar situation. A select group of senior jumpers focus on the mistake made and offer good-natured teasing for "packing my own malfunction". I am acutely aware that the teasing serves as a lesson in itself, because it not only reminds me of my lack of experience and my

place in the social structure, it also reinforces the bigger picture – the importance of care and attention in all aspects of skydiving. My desire to do everything perfect makes this somewhat of a painful lesson. It was valuable, but embarrassing as well.

An investigation by our Master Rigger reveals that there is no damage to any part of my rig, nor was there any prior wear and tear that could account for the mishap. I am told that it is often difficult or impossible to detect the precise cause of a parachute malfunction. Once the gear is laid out on the ground, the parachute is no longer inflated and the tension on the lines and the rest of the rig is gone, any type of entanglement may right itself. In this case, the only logical explanation is that, indeed, it was a packing error from the night before. I am told that it was an easy error to make if one is careless, rushed or inexperienced. In fact, nine times out often, such an error would not have caused a malfunction at all. I feel some consolation, knowing that I've learned a valuable lesson that cost me nothing more than a reserve re-pack. I have much to reflect upon.

Inquiring into the story

This narrative reveals a fundamental shift in my perception of the event from the point of view of a story-teller and as a skydiver. The chain of events leading up to this period of time was characterized by a heroic outcome of triumph over adversity. The point where the story begins is the immediate aftermath of this triumph, where I am collecting my thoughts and emotions in preparation for passing on this tale. There is a sense of confidence, pride, enthusiasm and aliveness. The feeling of pride is tempered by a burgeoning realization of the seriousness of this event which brings on a sense of humility. Nonetheless, this increased breadth of self-awareness is barely

enough to reign in my child-like enthusiasm. After all, this tale seems more than worthy of an audience.

Having been just brought back to earth safely by my own hand, I am reacting to the magnitude of having just faced an unusually dangerous situation. I marvel at my own detachment and calmness under pressure. The adrenaline rush brought on by the intensity of this experience is just subsiding, and my sense of omnipotence is settling back down to earth as well. Swelling confidence is tempered by the growing, conscious reality that I have just come face to face with my own mortality. With brutal suddenness and most unexpectedly, I have been presented with a test – the only true measuring stick to determine whether or not I have "the right stuff". It is a rite of passage which I completed successfully and without incident. Yet, I am aware that thousands of skydivers are faced with similar situations at some point in their careers, and the vast majority of these jumpers live to tell their tales as well. This knowledge provides a measure of humility and perspective to the experience, powerful as it may be to a novice jumper.

The changes occur in an instant. The Drop Zone Safety Officer who picks me up in the desert questions me about who packed the parachute prior to this jump. This simple question carries a huge impact for a number of reasons. First, I am reminded of the straightforward reality of the situation – that I packed my own malfunction. Second, I instantly realize that there are consequences to this fact; likely, my comrades will view the chain of events as a logical outcome of inexperience and carelessness. Third, I am emotionally deflated by the fact that I had directly created a

dangerous situation for myself. My immediate reaction of elation and even omnipotence is overwhelmed by feelings of humility and embarrassment.

Furthermore, in those moments immediately following this revelation, the storyteller is changed forever, as is the story. The event can never be relived, nor can the story be told, exactly as it happened, because there is now a burden of conscious restraint placed on the story by the storyteller. Innocence has been lost, just as the adrenaline coursing through my veins during those fleeting moments has been forever diluted and dissipated. Each time the heroic tale is told, the cause and effect relationship must be revealed by the question, "Who packed it?"

Lingering Doubt

I am in freefall. Precious seconds are rapidly ticking away, yet time seems to stand still. There is familiar exhilaration, and I am fully in the moment. With total concentration and focus, I'm working hard to accomplish the maneuvers my partner and I had planned for this particular skydive. My concentration is at a peak, and although some movements are forced and awkward I have learned to strike a balance between relaxation and exertion. My partner, more experienced than I, wills me with his eyes to perform the next move. Indeed, my eyes are bored into his so that our individual movements merge into a collective effort. Verbal communication is not possible due to the deafening roar of the wind. The intensity of his expression tells me we are performing well.

We are nearing the end of our skydive, and the earth is rapidly approaching. Like a recurring bad dream, an unseen, unacknowledged doubt begins creeping into

my mind. I'm feeling an odd mixture of pride and doubt, jubilation and anxiety. I am in control, but something is not quite right.

I check my altimeter and see that we are at 5,000 feet. Three seconds till break off. We are close enough to touch each other and we exchange big grins, but confidence is not what I feel. We wave at each other and I turn and begin tracking away. That lingering doubt begins growing like a festering splinter in my mind that won't go away. I count five seconds and flare out of my track to stop my forward momentum. My body is tense, and I hold my breath. My right hand reaches back to the bottom of my container to find my pilot chute handle. My hand fumbles around to find nothing. I know it's there, but I can't find it. The lingering doubt begins ballooning into a sense of panic, and my breath comes in shallow gasps. A voice in my head screams, "I'M NOT PULLING SILVER THIS TIME! Not for something lame like this!" I am referring to the act of pulling the silver handle on the left front of my harness which activates my reserve parachute in case of an emergency. There are fourteen separate parachute malfunctions that a skydiver may potentially face. A missing pilot chute handle is the most embarrassing one, particularly if it is found intact after landing.

I quickly remind myself that altitude is bleeding away fast. I am still falling at a rate of 1,000 feet every five seconds, and I am now below 3,500 feet, which is my required pull altitude. I return to a stable box position with my elbows at ninety degrees and my hands on each side of my head. I take a deep breath and reach back one more time. There it is. I breathe a sigh of relief, grasp the handle firmly in my right hand and pitch it sideways into the flow of clean air. The opening sequence is a

welcome sensation. I look up to see the bright colors of my fully inflated canopy, but my feelings of relief are tempered by frustration and anger. I curse softly, and I am thankful that this moment of anxiety was a private one between me and the sky.

I've been here in Arizona at this annual training camp for seven days now, and I've started to experience misgivings about this sport that I love so much. Normally, the buzz of activity around the drop zone gives me a welcome feeling of excitement and anticipation, but lately I have not shared in the cheery mood of the other jumpers around me. So I had removed myself from the landing area to find my own spot on the grass for some seclusion and privacy. Truthfully, I had hoped that no one would notice, but Jeff had sensed my glum mood after our jump and had come over to investigate. I was trying to get a grasp on my own feelings, and false bravado was not working.

"I couldn't find my handle. This is the third time that has happened in two days, and it had never happened before. I keep having this vision of something bad happening, something out of my control, and it's making me real nervous. It's sure taking the fun out of jumping. What the hell's wrong with me?"

"Don't worry about it, man. Most people get a little freaked out after a cutaway. It's natural. But the main thing is that you did the right thing when it counted"

"I know! That's what I don't get. It happened three days ago! IT'S OVER! Why am I freaked out now when I handled this thing perfectly?"

"That's the spirit!" He slaps me on the shoulder and mutters some words of encouragement, but I'm not there to hear them. Images from three days before are flooding through my memory. He rises and walks away, and I close my eyes.

I think back to The Jump. A beautiful morning, a feeling of relaxed confidence and a perfect skydive. I remember pulling. Then the instant when time stood still – when I realized in a flash that I had a bag lock and had to cut away. I remember the feeling of complete emotional detachment, looking for and grasping my handles. I can feel myself ripping the cut away handle loose with enough force to punch through a brick wall. Adrenaline was flooding into my system. I feel my main canopy break away and immediately rip my reserve handle loose with equal intensity. I can see that robin-egg blue canopy over my head and feel my handles clutched firmly in my hands. I feel elation, pride and relief. With intense satisfaction, my mind opens to the fact that I just saved my own life exactly as I had been trained to do.

I remember landing alone, far out in the desert and being picked up. A simple question – "Who packed it?" - brought me back to the sobering reality that I had caused this incident with incorrect packing technique. I smile to myself, remembering the sense of disappointment I felt at that moment. I had since retold my story with a guarded sense of pride tempered by my having caused this event. I smile to myself now because I am wiser than I was a few days ago. And this is wisdom I never could have attained without having gone through this experience.

I open my eyes again and take a deep breath. The sun feels good on my face again, and I am more at ease than I have been for several days. Reliving these events has helped me to put my anxiety in perspective. I know that a certain level of

nervousness is not only useful, but necessary for survival. However, I have learned first hand what irrational fears can do. The fear I was holding on to was not only keeping me from experiencing fun and enjoyment while skydiving, it was creating a problem that need not exist. The problem of not finding my pilot chute handle could pose a danger to my life if I were to become fixated on finding it and lose altitude awareness.

Packing my pilot chute more carefully every time would be a logical solution. However, my most significant gain in self awareness came from reliving The Jump in detail and allowing myself to feel good about rising to the occasion. The fact that I had packed my own malfunction was completely irrelevant at the instant when it occurred. The undeniable fact remained that my life had depended upon quick decision making and immediate action. Without hesitation I had performed correctly and lived to tell the tale. Allowing myself to take credit for that was the mental leap I needed to grow from the experience.

Inquiring into the story

This story reveals an interesting revelation about my state of mind in the days following the malfunction. I continued to skydive for several days after this incident while feeling a growing sense of self doubt. This self doubt seems to be acting in a way to recreate the conditions of the malfunction, perhaps because I had not acknowledged it as real. I had blamed myself for the packing error and allowed my lack of confidence in my packing skills to interfere with my development as a skydiver.

In essence, I had turned the experience into a failure rather than a successful accomplishment to be proud of. In so doing, I had lost sight of the lessons contained therein. It was important that I learn from the packing error so that I may avoid repeating it. However, it was equally important that I take credit for performing my emergency procedures correctly and coming out of the experience unscathed. After all, needless self doubt in the face of future malfunctions may potentially lead to incorrect decision making and a less positive outcome.

As a result of this event and the subsequent emotional after-effects, I came to a better understanding of myself and my capabilities as a skydiver. I learned the critical importance of separating the cause of a mistake from its outcome. Reflecting upon my decisions and actions in the face of a life-threatening emergency allowed me to celebrate the success of the malfunction rather than dwell on assigning the blame. I was alive and in one piece. I had learned an invaluable lesson. Perhaps most importantly, I had proven to myself that I had what it took to save my own life when it really counted. In addition, I had a powerful story to tell to skydivers and non-skydivers alike.

Chapter 7

Becoming a Coach

Understanding spotting

The designated landing area on a drop zone is a large patch of open grass where skydivers are expected to land their parachutes. It is considered very important to land there, so much so that it is referred to as "finding your way home". This is not just a matter of pride; it is a matter of safety as well, because obstacles border the LZ. These obstacles could be buildings, trees, cars, telephone wires, fences or bodies of water. One particular drop zone in California has a gun range bordering the landing area. At most drop zones, "landing out" does not result in being shot. However, in high wind conditions or with one small mistake in decision making, hitting an obstacle could lead to a much greater likelihood of equipment damage, serious injury or death.

That is where spotting comes in. Spotting involves gathering information about wind direction from a number of possible sources in order to tell the pilot what position and heading to fly for jump run and when to open the door. This will determine when you and your group will begin to climb out and set up for exit. The idea is that you exit the airplane upwind of the landing area so the winds will push you and all the other groups on the load back home. Although this process is logical, it is not always easy to estimate. It takes instinct, judgment and practice, because the upper winds can be layered and moving in directions very different to the winds on the surface.

Information on wind direction and velocity can be gained from a number of sources. A device known as a wind drift indicator (WDI) can be dropped out of the plane and observed as it falls slowly to the earth. The pilot and/or other jumpers who have been on previous skydives earlier in the day can be questioned for information. Normally, while climbing to altitude, we would use what is referred to as a Rate One turn (three degrees per second = 360 degrees in two minutes) to determine the amount of wind drift if it was the first load of the day, or skydiving operations had ceased for ninety minutes or more. However, there is no better way to determine wind direction and velocity than to observe other jumpers under canopy.

Spotting a load

The first time I was truly tested on my spotting ability was in September 2006, when I had nearly one hundred skydives to my credit. I was part of a group of five Coach One candidates set to jump on the second morning of an intensive three day course. I had volunteered to be the spotter on the first load that morning. Spotting was a skill that I felt lacking in relative to my other skydiving abilities. However, it was a mandatory part of the Coach One syllabus. Therefore, I would have to demonstrate my spotting ability at least once during the three evaluation jumps that made up the practical elements of the course. I knew my uncertainty about spotting was shared by all the other candidates as well, so I did not feel alone in my fear. It made sense for me to face that uncertainty head on rather than avoiding the issue.

It was with no small amount of relief that I observed a first jump student land her parachute that grey September morning. Lyal, the DZO (Drop Zone Operator), had sent up a load to 3,500 feet first thing in the morning just before we, the Coach

One candidates, were geared up to do our first of the three evaluation jumps. This girl had taken the First Jump Course at an earlier date, but had not been allowed to jump at the time due to poor weather conditions. She had arrived early that morning to do her "rain check" jump, and this was a fortunate coincidence for me to be able to gather such valuable information about the wind conditions prior to taking off.

The severe upper winds pushed this young student about a half mile to the southeast where she was forced to land in a field of bales. Like all students, she wore a radio receiver mounted on her chest strap in order to receive instructions from Lyal on the ground with a Walkie Talkie. He followed her in his six-wheel Ranger ATV, talking her down to a safe landing. Although we did not fear for her safety, we wondered what state of mind she might be in being forced to land so far from home on her very first skydive.

Inadvertently, this person had helped me tremendously. Watching her canopy drift a shocking distance during her descent allowed me to formulate a clear, concise mental picture of where I needed to spot our load so we could all land in the middle of the DZ. Although I would not have been penalized for a bad spot due to the unusually high winds, it was comforting to have this vital information. Now that I knew exactly what the winds were doing up there, my job was much simpler. I conferred with Lyal and the course instructor to gather as much information and advice as possible. Then I chose an appropriate heading to instruct the pilot to fly and a location above the ground for exit. Now that I possessed the information and knowledge to do a good job, the stage was set. I was ready.

We are on jump run and I am struggling to determine where we are in relation to the landing area. The aircraft is passing over the DZ, but precisely where I am not sure. I am fully aware that the pilot knows our exact location. However, he has been instructed to fly somewhat off course. That will force me to take control of the situation and make heading corrections to demonstrate my ability.

Finally I notice the crossroads bordering the northwest corner of the drop zone property and see that we are on a northwest heading, just as we should be, but a quarter mile or so off course. That is something I should have noticed thirty to sixty seconds ago. I make a fist and point my thumb out towards the window in a vigorous "hitchhiking" motion. Abruptly, the pilot banks the plane forty five degrees to the right, providing not only the necessary course correction but also an unobstructed view of the ground below us. Relieved, I see that we are going to make it to my predetermined spot before it is time to open the door.

My mind is racing; I have made several decisions by "the seat of my pants" and the most critical one, the decision of when to open the door, is coming. We are back on track and it is time to turn again. I quickly wave my hand in a chopping motion to indicate the heading correction. The pilot banks the plane abruptly to the left and I lose sight of the ground below. I am questioning myself a little, and the loss of visual reference is somewhat disconcerting. Attempting to calculate how much time I need to wait for the door only elevates my stress level. Besides, this decision is far better made early rather than late. Although I'm reasonably certain it is still early, I turn to the pilot and nod. "Door," I state with conviction. His agreeable expression,

together with his acquiescence, tells me that I'm not far off the mark. He reaches in front of me, unlatches the handle and pushes it outwards.

The familiar blast of cold air invades the cabin with greater force than usual. Although I do not fear the open door like I once did, the frigid wind chill is uncomfortable and I feel responsible to my fellow jumpers for exposing them to it so soon. Immediately, I reach my head out to see the ground again and realize we will be waiting a minute or two before exiting. Our airspeed on jump run is always a constant at eighty knots, but the headwind we are flying into is roughly sixty knots. That means our ground speed is painfully slow, and we need to cover a quarter mile or so before climb out.

I decide to split the difference between our current position and our predetermined exit point. In an ideal world, I would have waited until we had reached the exact spot I had chosen earlier, but with the wind chill causing grimaces on the faces of my colleagues, I decide it's time to go. In my gut I know that everyone will make it home from here, so I look Aidan in the eyes and nod with the same conviction as I had shown the pilot earlier. The nod meant that, as his coach, I was telling him it was time to climb out. His obedience told me that I had made the decision within an acceptable margin for error. In reality, his 13,000 skydives spanning over twenty years, not to mention his position as course instructor, would give him ultimate veto power over my decision if I was so far off as to jeopardize our safety and that of the other jumpers. Watching him climb out onto the wing gives me a few seconds to clear my head. More importantly, it signals the end of the spotting exercise. Five seconds later we are free of the plane and a challenging skydive begins.

Inquiring into the story

There is an interesting paradox happening in this story. On the one hand, I have made significant progress in my skydiving career with relatively few skydives accumulated. Considering the fact that I have accumulated the bare minimum number of skydives to qualify for this coaching course, I am proud of my status and feel confident in my ability. On the other hand, I am confronted with a challenge that I should be prepared for, yet have managed to avoid for the most part to this point in my career. This tension between a new level of confidence and insecurity about a task I should be competent at but feel inadequately prepared for creates a different dynamic than previously explored during the narratives that were told about the earlier stages of my career.

I began the story with a description of spotting and the events leading up to the jump that day to put this challenge and the ensuing tension in perspective. Spotting is a vital skill that one begins learning in the early days of freefall training. In reality, very few skydivers develop this skill concurrently with freefall and canopy skills, due to the fact that they can usually count on a more experienced jumper or the pilot to tell them where to begin climbing out of the plane.

Like most other skydivers, I tended to be so focused on other aspects of the jumps I performed that I had largely ignored spotting during my development. As a result, my spotting ability at that time was comparable to having a grade five reading ability after having reached high school. Being a participant in the course afforded me a sense of belonging as a skydiver. However, my feelings about spotting lingered like

a hidden secret, causing me to question myself to the point where I felt as though I was faking it for this evaluation.

As we reach exit altitude, my mind is racing; I am straining to see vital landmarks to determine our position. As precious seconds tick away and pressure builds, I am unable to determine our precise location. The time for a decision is rapidly approaching. I order the door opened and soon discover we are much too early. A significant heading correction brings us closer to the spot, but still we must wait. All the while, I am increasingly aware that my every move is under scrutiny. However, I am simultaneously aware that I have met my own expectations for this drill, regardless of falling short in the eyes of my instructor. This knowledge allows me to feel a minor triumph despite my less–than–perfect performance. Like the high school student with a grade five reading ability, I have managed to believe in myself. Somehow, I have risen to the occasion and dealt with an unacknowledged obstacle. What may have seemed like faking it has translated to a reasonable performance under pressure, and in the larger picture, a measure of satisfaction has been gained.

Coach One

The drop zone is desolate and grey this late September morning. Though the ceiling is high, the grey blanket of clouds makes rain seem imminent. Moisture covers the earth from last night's precipitation, and a layer of dew clings to every wall and window of the buildings around the site. Inside the packing tent, couches and carpet are all damp. Serene, deserted and alone, the drop zone is indifferent to the weather and the elements that are so critical a factor in our jumping ritual. She

patiently awaits the arrival of the sun, the skydivers, the pulse and the energy that bring her to life every weekend.

I'm alone on the grass at the edge of the landing area, studying the wind and wondering if the sun will shine. I'm thankful for the solitude. Today I will need to summon as much concentration and focus as I can muster. If the weather holds, we will be jumping in an hour and I will be called upon to demonstrate virtually all the skydiving skills I have learned to this point in my career.

It is early Saturday morning, the second of three days of the most intense, demanding course I have ever been involved in. It is a Level One Coach Course, the successful completion of which will allow me to become a nationally certified skydiving coach. I am about to perform the first of three evaluation jumps that will progressively and comprehensively test not only my skydiving skills but also my knowledge of coaching techniques learned in the classroom. I know I am up to the challenge, but I am acutely aware that anything less than my best will not do. After all, the responsibility of teaching novices is not to be taken lightly. If I am to achieve "Coach 1" status by the end of tomorrow, I will need to demonstrate the skill, confidence and professionalism befitting an instructor in this demanding sport.

The ceiling has held and without delay we are geared up and ready. As we walk out to the plane I feel the nerves I used to feel before stepping into the ring during my days as a competitor in Taekwondo. However, this feeling is very familiar and, in fact, welcome to me. In my short skydiving career, I have come to enjoy the experience of testing myself, getting out of my comfort zone and pushing my physical and mental limits, just as I have done repeatedly in the martial arts for more than

twenty years. Unlike my student and novice days in skydiving, I know that I am prepared. I have the skills, knowledge and training to perform up to the instructor's expectations, which are very high. I no longer feel like a beginner, operating on faith and taking a leap into the unknown every time I jump.

This course is very demanding and challenging, but there is an air of focused enthusiasm, camaraderie, mutual respect and professionalism. I am fortunate to be well acquainted with the head instructor and course facilitators, who will be role playing the part of novices for our evaluation jumps. They are all expert skydivers with advanced qualifications, but they treat us like friends and colleagues rather than students.

As we climb into the plane, we assume our roles as coaches and novices. The aircraft takes off and begins climbing to altitude and I reflect on the task ahead. My job will be to freefall in close proximity to and, later, evaluate the performance of my "novice", who for this particular jump is actually Aidan, the course instructor – a man with over 13,000 skydives. I will be expected to watch his exit, fly down and position myself about three feet above and ten feet to one side of him, then observe him performing three front loops. When we reach break-off altitude, I will turn and track away a safe distance for deployment. After landing, I will be expected to provide corrective feedback to the "novice", answer any questions he may have, and suggest an appropriate task for his next skydive. At the end of this jump and the concurrent role playing process, I will receive a grade not only on how well I fly my body and stay with my "novice", but also on how well I perform in my role as a confident and knowledgeable coach. I offer a few brief instructions to help my student focus and

relax, knowing he is the one evaluating me on how focused and relaxed I am. The irony of the situation is magnified because of his dry, bland expression. His shallow, technical "acting performance" lacks the emotional engagement and enthusiasm which would feed my confidence right now. Regardless, I dismiss his poor acting ability and stay focused on my job. Although Aidan seems lackluster at the moment, I am completely aware that he is taking this exercise very seriously. I sense that his bland responses to my instructions are designed to keep from influencing any of my decisions. I smile to myself at the awkwardness of the situation. The discomfort created by this strange role reversal is not going to stop me from performing at my best.

Part of my role as a coach on this jump includes guiding the pilot and choosing our exit point, a process known as spotting. After I instruct the pilot to make a course correction, he opens the door on my command. Immediately I realize that it's still too early to begin our climb out, and the frigid air at this altitude is forcefully prodding me to make the final decision. With the door wide open, I am subjecting all the other occupants of this tiny aircraft to the blast of icy air. Seconds drag by as I peer out the door, watching the ground below and willing the plane to hurry to our spot. When my gut tells me that we have waited long enough for everyone to make it back home, I look Aidan in the eyes and nod with conviction. He returns my nod with the same bland expression and lack of enthusiasm as before, and for a brief instant I question my decision. However, he obeys my command and steps out onto the landing gear, positioning himself for exit. This action tells me that my spot was acceptable, and I breathe a sigh of relief. As he clears the door frame I take a deep

breath, place my left foot out on the step and adjust into a coiled position on my right knee like a sprinter ready for the starter's pistol. We make eye contact for a second and nod again to each other. With definite motions of his body he executes the count: up, down and away.

As he hops off the landing gear into open space I'm already in motion, nearly pushing him off the step so as to minimize separation on exit. I stretch my body into a dive, and my eyes are glued to him as he slowly tumbles away into a back loop. Normally, I would find this miscue humorous, but he is acting precisely according to a prearranged sequence which I was not privy to. As his performance unfolds, I must store it away in my mind. My ability to give accurate feedback on his performance after this jump is over will be just as important as keeping proximity in freefall.

Arching hard, I increase my fall rate to catch him and situate myself slightly above and to the side of his position. He watches me take my slot in the sky and executes the first of three imperfect front loops. His awkwardness is laughable because, much like the botched exit, I know it is manufactured in order to provide me with a realistic coaching scenario. Were it not for the fact that I am focusing intently on remembering his performance, I would, indeed, find this funny. As Aidan initiates his third maneuver, I suddenly become aware that I have allowed him to drop out on me by a large distance. I have been concentrating so intently on observing and analyzing his performance that I have become a bystander, rather than an active participant, in this skydive. I am allowed to reach a maximum separation of thirty feet. We are well over sixty feet apart at the conclusion of his third front loop.

There is little I can do about it because we have reached break off altitude. At this distance, eye contact is barely possible, but a wave-off is necessary. I watch him turn and begin to track away. As I flare out of my track and deploy, I curse at my performance, unaware that this mistake would play only a small part in my overall grade.

After landing, we take the time to pack our parachutes and gather our thoughts. We sit down at one of the picnic tables bordering the landing area and begin discussing our jump. This debrief is a simulation and, thus, I am still in the role of coach. I ask Aidan to tell me as much as he can remember about the skydive, starting with how he felt in the plane. We talk about the exit and his series of three front loops, and I soon discover that his recall of these events is limited. Now that I have gathered as much information as possible, including my own recollections, it is incumbent upon me to provide some useful feedback.

One of the most important things I learned during our ten hour classroom session yesterday was that I do not have to remember every detail of a skydive to be an effective coach. It was a revelation to me that it is perfectly acceptable to ask the novice for his version of events before I provided him with my brilliant interpretation and showered him with wisdom in the form of precise feedback. Things happen fast in freefall, and it was comforting to learn that even the most seasoned coaches do not have a perfect memory of each maneuver. With that in mind, I begin my interpretation of the jump. I congratulate him on his performance and then begin to dissect the freefall. "You were stable on exit, but then you did a back loop as we were coming down the hill. Do you remember that?" He looks at me with a puzzled

expression as though straining to recall the exit. I smile broadly, knowing that I am now seeing the full range of his acting ability. "You had a good arch, but then you broke your arch at the hips and tucked your knees up a bit. That's why you did a back loop", I state emphatically. The course instructor looks back at me and nods his approval.

I admit to Aidan that I can't recall the precise order of events, because each of his three front loops were different. I provide the best information I can, analyzing and breaking down his mistakes so he could improve on his future performance. I suggest alternative tasks for his next skydive and conclude our debrief with more positive encouragement. He immediately transforms back into course conductor and expert skydiver. I feel tentative at first, knowing that I performed somewhat awkwardly in freefall and not really sure how well I have done as a coach. As expected, he informs me that I need practice spotting. He provides me with some very useful information about how to anticipate the movements of a student or novice in freefall, and how to stay close. He docks me a full mark for allowing such a large separation in freefall, as well as a half mark for waiting too long to make course corrections while spotting. There were a few other half-mark deductions; nonetheless, I am proud and carry a feeling of great satisfaction having completed such a challenging task. Indeed, it was physically and mentally demanding, but my mark – 17/20 - tells me that I am on track and am well on my way to becoming a coach.

Inquiring into the story

In a number of ways, the final narrative of this project is symbolic of my skydiving progression. To this point in my career, I had challenged myself constantly.

I had always strived to accomplish the goals set out before me by the CSPA in order to prove my ability and receive the next certification. Progressing along the steps laid out by the National organization allowed me to move ahead in the sport, not only technically but in terms of confidence as well. The satisfaction from advancing aggressively represented an additional level of motivation and emotional reinforcement on top of the intrinsic rewards inherent in skydiving.

Since beginning in the sport, I had a goal to become an instructor. The jump played out in this story was the first of three skydives contained in a coaching course – in air evaluations of my skill to determine whether or not I was ready for the responsibility of coaching novices. The course conductor and facilitators treated all participants as colleagues, which was a slight shift from the days of student and novice training. There was an air of professionalism and camaraderie that set the stage for a challenging and demanding yet positive learning environment.

The situation in and around this jump placed a number of demands on my ability that I had not yet faced in the sport of skydiving. As the course required, I demonstrated my spotting ability. The tension involved in that exercise warranted a separate narrative – the one explored just prior to this story. Immediately after deciding our exit point, I take my "student" into freefall, and the next challenge begins. I am being evaluated not only on my ability to fly in close proximity with my student, but also on my ability to recall the events of the skydive and provide constructive feedback after we land.

The jump progresses rather quickly, and I find myself a bystander rather than an active participant in the skydive. The entire exercise demands intense

concentration and complete focus. Rather than trusting my ability and simply flying my slot, I became fixated with observing the performance. My body is stiff and my movements are late. As a result, I find myself separated from my student by a considerable distance, and I am penalized on my evaluation.

The role play in this exercise created an awkward dynamic, from the instructions and advice I gave on the plane ride to altitude right through the debrief after the skydive was over. I had been tested on my skills numerous times before, but never had I been under scrutiny while role playing someone else. It was a great way to explore the role of a coach while under supervision. At the same time, it was nerve wracking to be scrutinized and evaluated while performing in this new role. The added pressure of teaching someone who had been teaching me since the beginning of my career made my role seem forced and unnatural. In addition to the pressure brought on by being evaluated, I was presented with an instructor who acted abnormally bored with the situation. This only served to make it blatantly obvious that we were role playing and made it difficult for me to relax and do what needed to be done.

Nonetheless, I was undeterred from my objective. I refused to permit even my perfectionist tendencies to rob me of an effective performance. When the job was complete, I knew my spot was not perfect, I had not performed my best in freefall, and my ability to accurately and completely recall the performance of my novice was lacking. Yet I felt a sense of pride in my accomplishment. I had performed as good as or better than expected with regard to spotting. I had lived in the role of a coach for this jump, and had learned a great deal. It had been a tremendously valuable

experience. At the conclusion of this jump, I had a taste of what the coaching process entailed. Most importantly, I gained a measure of self confidence knowing that I was up to the demands and challenges that lay ahead. I knew I could easily correct the mistakes I had made. I knew that I belonged in this course, and that I would be capable of coaching novice skydivers when finished this course.

Chapter 8

Discussion

The experience of skydiving in Deweyan terms

For the vast majority of those who try skydiving, the experience is a one-time event, never to be repeated. It becomes a distant memory, fading into the realm of what Dewey (1938) would describe as non-educative. For me, the experience contained emotions and sensations that had a profound effect. These feelings were intrinsically rewarding to the point that I knew, beyond all doubt, that I would continue with the sport. Despite significant anxiety, uncertainty and lack of confidence in the days leading up to my first skydives, I confronted my fear and followed through with the plan. The acts of driving out to the drop zone with a close friend, paying several hundred dollars, sitting through the training and performing the tasks necessary for a tandem passenger required commitment and resolve. More importantly, the excitement and anticipation of a positive outcome juxtaposed with the intense anxiety and uncertainty that were inherent in the jump solidified the desire to build on this experience. From the beginning, I came to associate joy, excitement and thrilling adventure with skydiving. In the Deweyan sense, I had undergone a positive, educative experience.

The skydiving experience began to gain continuity as I continued on in my career. According to Dewey's principle of continuity, an experience can foster growth and maturity "…if (it) arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense to carry a person over dead places in the future…." (1938, p. 31). Evidence of such growth was seen in later narratives when I

was faced with the growing responsibility of skydiving under my own supervision. The self-imposed pressure and aloneness added new dimensions to the prevailing anxiety before each skydive. Perhaps it was this aloneness that came to amplify my fear regarding the opening of the door just prior to exit. My metaphor of the sky cracking each time the door was opened personified the feeling of violence that had come to surround this phase of the experience. Nonetheless, I continued to skydive and develop my skills in spite of my emotional turmoil. In fact, repeatedly facing these fears gave rise to an eventual breakthrough as I became open to the possibility of confidence regarding the exit. Having achieved a milestone in my career near the end of my first season of jumping, I came to realize I had grown and matured not only in skill level but also in my ability to handle my arousal level as I entered into and performed in freefall. This breakthrough and the subsequent revelation were tremendously rewarding and fulfilling. Indeed, this development in my skydiving career had become educative in Dewey's sense.

Later in my career, a parachute malfunction served as an invaluable learning tool. As with every malfunction, it was completely unexpected. Proper training and calmness under pressure allowed me to react instantly and appropriately. In the immediate aftermath of this event, I felt intense pride, jubilation, and even omnipotence at having reacted so well. Within minutes, I was emotionally deflated by the realization that I had packed my own malfunction. Perhaps the guilt from this revelation led me to frame the experience as a negative one for a short time afterwards. A few days later, I was forced to examine my thoughts and feelings about the malfunction. At that time, I came to realize that I could choose to interpret the

experience as a positive and educative one. Allowing myself credit for creating a positive outcome from a potential tragedy made for a successful resolution of this experience. Thus, the experience came to encapsulate the principle of continuity.

In a very real sense, Dewey's concept of experience as a "collective human phenomenon" (p. 35) is what made skydiving a reality for me. Since early childhood, I had been exposed through movies and television images to the notion that it was not only possible, but realistic. Over the years, I had seen documentary footage and human interest stories about people engaging in the sport and was completely fascinated. In addition, I had met several people who had tried the sport and had questioned them about their experiences. Having gathered information from a variety of sources, I was able to make a conscious decision to engage in the sport. Because my assimilation of knowledge and the formation of my opinions came from many sources and took place over the course of my lifetime, it is difficult, if not impossible, to speculate as to whether or not my participation in the sport would have been initiated without the same information and opportunities. Furthermore, as this study focuses on emotions rather than motivations, such speculation is beyond the scope of this paper.

The dramatic world view and influence of Western culture

Although not examined in great detail in the preceding narratives, there was a very strong element of pride in my becoming a skydiver. Images from movies and television had led me to believe not only that skydiving was a realistic pastime but that it would provide intense thrills and stimulation. Yet the collective opinions of most outsiders confirmed what researchers have discussed in the past – skydiving is

perceived as a risky activity. Anecdotal findings from numerous discussions with outsiders suggest that most would not engage in the sport due to overwhelming fear and uncertainty about the experience. The contrast between my personal beliefs and feelings about the sport and the sentiments of those around me who did not share my enthusiasm served to create a greater level of motivation for me to continue.

As stated by Celsi et al. (1993, p. 2), "…whether one is an actual participant, or an individual living vicariously with consumer goods as lifestyle props, the style and colour of high-risk sports have become a badge of our times. We are all admonished to 'just do it,' and 'play hard,' for 'life is short.'" Exposure to such catch-phrases, as well as pop culture representations of skydiving through movies and television, emphasized that I was engaging in a sport that was truly unique and special. It was an important element in identity construction during my early days as a skydiver.

Celsi's dramatic model of high-risk leisure consumption (1993) provides a useful framework from which to explain my experiences in skydiving. The dramatic construction, "…in its most fundamental form…pits protagonist against antagonist in a structured and discrete context that progresses temporally through periods of tension building to *denouement* and *catharsis*" (p. 2). The first stage, known as *agon*, is characterized by the introduction of conflicting forces. My experiences were often characterized by significant pre-jump anxiety that contrasted with excitement and anticipation of what was to come. Just as in the dramatic model, there was a buildup of tension between these protagonist and antagonistic forces as the ride to altitude progressed. Without fail, the tension between fear and excitement reached its peak at

the moment I exited the aircraft. In an instant, anxiety was replaced with joy and elation as the tension of the agon stage gave way to denouement – the resolution of conflict. Just as described in the dramatic model, I experienced a cathartic release of emotions during the freefall and canopy ride. To some extent, these emotions continue to play themselves out each time I perform a skydive, just as they did on my very first jump.

Specifically, the dramatic model can be applied to my beginning experiences. During each of my first two skydives, my parachute was deployed by an instructor. Also, there was little or no skill performance required of me. These factors not only made the experience safer and more predictable, they allowed for total focus on the experiential nature of the jump. Although I was cognitively aware that the laws of physics and the procedures involved were completely predictable to my instructors, I was emotionally unsure due to my lack of practical experience. Perhaps it was the absence of skill performance, combined with the stark contrast in emotions throughout the progression from take-off and aircraft ride to a safe return to earth under canopy, which provided such a rich contextual background for the dramatic model described by Celsi et al.

Equally compelling, from the standpoint of this dramatic model, was the heightened emotional struggle I experienced repeatedly during my student and novice training. The fear I felt regarding my exit from the airplane provided consistent and continuing anxiety during the preparatory and in-flight phases of each skydive. In fact, the opening of the door created a state of heightened anxiety which I began to dread. Just as on my tandem and first jump solo, the significant anxiety experienced

during those moments served to heighten the feelings of joy and elation experienced during the freefall and canopy ride of each jump. It was not until the day I reached a milestone in my career that I had a sudden, unexpected breakthrough in my ability to cope with the emotions linked to the exit. In a very real sense, this particular skydive represented a catharsis of the collective emotions that had built up throughout my skydiving career and reached a peak at that point. That particular jump left me with a new-found feeling of efficacy and self determination.

Similarly profound in the dramatic context was the experience of my first malfunction. Ironically, this particular skydive was preceded by a light-hearted emotional state unlike nearly all my previous jumps. I had attained a new level of confidence from being immersed in the skydiving culture and performing repeated jumps over a short period of time while on a skydiving holiday. However, the absence of fear and anxiety prior to the jump was in stark contrast to feelings of total elation and omnipotence immediately after a successful cutaway and subsequent reserve ride. Indeed, deploying my parachute only to learn that it was not going to open created a dramatic situation unlike any I had yet faced. Suddenly, death while skydiving changed from an abstract concept to a very tangible reality.

Subsequent reflection on this event caused a dramatic context of its own kind. Over the next few days, I developed a growing uncertainty and a decline in self-confidence due to unacknowledged fears about my own mortality. This build-up of tension occurred as I continued to skydive, resulting in decreased enjoyment and inability to focus on the task at hand. In this case, denouement came when my frustration level reached a point that I had to consider not jumping for a few days. I

had been unable to find and deploy my pilot chute for the third time in two days and was becoming genuinely concerned about such a distraction. I had no choice but to mentally relive the cutaway and analyze the cause of my emotional tension. Although I did not know it at the time, I had engaged in a process of unpacking the story I was living which began as I learned to pack my own malfunction. Choosing to unpack the experience of the cutaway and reframe it as a positive one allowed me to put it in perspective and move on in my career.

Celsi's dramatic model continued to play a significant role in my career as I made the transition to coaching. The last two narratives in this paper address the tensions involved in training to become a coach. Previous anxiety related to risks inherent in skydiving is replaced by the self-imposed pressure of wanting to perform well under challenging circumstances. Rather than anxiety at simply exiting the aircraft, nerves are present due to the demands of remembering and performing a host of new skills under direct scrutiny of an instructor. As the skydive unfolds, I perform the required tasks somewhat awkwardly but effectively. In the end, catharsis is related more to a sense of self-actualization than survival. I have gained a much greater measure of awareness and control over myself and the entire skydiving process. My identity has begun to shift from a student to that of a leader.

Peak experience

Beginning with my tandem jump, I found the skydiving experience to be an extraordinary activity. It had a profound psychological and emotional effect, leading to the desire for repetition of the experience. There was an overwhelming sense of happiness, joy, exhilaration and freedom brought on by the intense stimulation of

freefall. These emotions were further solidified by a tremendous feeling of accomplishment and pride at having faced and overcome a significant level of fear. Thus, moments of indescribable kinesthetic beauty punctuated what often began as an anxiety – ridden endeavor.

Lipscombe (1999) illustrated how Abraham Maslow's concept of peak experience was a critical element in describing the skydiving experience. Maslow's nineteen characterizations of the peak experience (1999, p. 270) create a rich illustration of the skydiving experience. For example, during my tandem skydive, I experienced total harmony and complete absorption in the moment. I had a sense of insignificance, and yet there was the realization of an ultimate truth. Fusion of my self and the experience were punctuated by a sense of awe and reverence for the moment. Time seemed to stand still as I tried to process what was going on around me. It was a self fulfilling experience that exceeded not only my expectations, but anything I had done before. It was truly indescribable.

My first solo jump was similar in magnitude, even though the freefall was missing. One of the distinct qualities of this particular jump was that time and space seemed to bend around me as I fell away from the plane and waited for my parachute to open. Also, the feeling of climbing out the door and performing the exit all alone afforded me a greater sense of control over my destiny despite the additional anxiety it created. I had a sense of unconscious skill performance, perhaps due to a state of over-arousal. The jump was characterized by several characterizations of peak experience, including ego-transcendence, fusion of dichotomies and a new perspective on the world below me (Lipscombe, 1999, p. 270).

As I progressed through the student and novice stages, profound joy and ecstasy were common emotions resulting from a sense of self-mastery. I was gaining control over my fears as well as progressing rapidly in terms of skill development. Without a doubt, conquering my fears pertaining to the exit had a profound emotional impact on me. This change represented a significant paradigm shift that was necessary for continued progression. Building on that experience, my first Arizona jump was a test of skill after a two month layoff. I was at a much larger drop zone jumping out of different aircraft. A successful skydive on this day was a triumph. It represented a transition of bigger and better things to come.

Perhaps more than any other skydive since my first, the jump leading to the cutaway described what was for me at that time the essence of a peak experience. Saving my own life gave rise to an adrenaline rush unlike any I had previously felt while jumping. It was truly a moment when time stood still and I was completely merged with my actions. There was no conscious thought involved once the decision to act was made. Most significantly, I felt Godlike at having performed so well under such circumstances. It was a feeling of control I cherished given the seriousness of this event. The feeling was momentary, ending abruptly after I learned I had caused the malfunction. However, the emotional impact, compounded by cognitive awareness of the magnitude of this event, is burned in my consciousness.

One of the most compelling factors in Lipscombe's (1999) research is that veteran skydivers report many of the nineteen elements found in a peak experience to be present in virtually every skydive. Indeed, my research supports this finding. Each skydive described in this narrative inquiry has many of the necessary elements,

although there are some that stand out more than others as true peak experiences. Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to propose that skydivers are afforded many opportunities to have peak experiences simply by continuing to participate in their sport. While Maslow claims that the peak experience tends to occur only a few times throughout the course of one's life, skydiving may very well be the conduit to a repetition of such a profound event.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

Summary of the project

Prior to the commencement of this project, I conducted an examination of existing research on skydiving. This search revealed that past studies on skydiving have been situated within the framework of one or more common themes, or labels, related to skydiving. For instance, the term "high-risk" is usually applied to the sport, and a number of labels, such as "risk takers", "edge workers", "sensation seekers", "stimulus addicts" and "thrill seekers" have been used to describe the participants. For this reason, the current project was conceived with the intention of moving beyond the need to generalize about the sport and the participants by exploring the qualitative experience of skydiving from an inside perspective.

The narratives in this study were presented for the purpose of exploring and learning about a single case. As such, it was not necessary or desirable to create conditions which could be replicable. A first-person narrative inquiry approach was utilized to provide detailed, honest, comprehensive accounts of numerous events in my skydiving career. By following these events in chronological order as they occurred, a temporal context was established by which to explore different emotions and compare how those emotions changed as I gained experience and improved my skill level over time. Through this process, a unique contextual landscape was created in the three dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The number of personal reflections presented in these narratives, together with the temporal aspect of linking the stories together in chronological order, presents the

reader with a perspective not yet explored in an academic study. Ultimately, it is hoped that academic understanding of the skydiving experience will be enhanced by this unique project.

The methodology and findings of this study were located far from what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to as the formalistic and reductionist boundaries. Rather than attempt to validate existing theories on emotions in skydiving, or begin with the assumption that I was studying a "high-risk sport", I chose to locate the study entirely within the experience of skydiving. The descriptive nature of the preceding narratives was intended as a landscape or reference point from which the reader may draw conclusions regarding the *transferability* of the emotional experiences discussed. Regarding Lincoln and Guba's notion of transferability (1985):

Perception and subjectivity, or "bias", are essential data and a crucial part of the knowledge generated by qualitative research. Local context and the human story, of which each individual and community story is a reflection, are primary goals of qualitative research, and not "*generalizability*" (Miller & Crabtree, 1994, pg. 348).

As this study was focused on the experience of skydiving, it was necessary to establish a context for the term '*experience*'. John Dewey's concept of experience (1938) was utilized as the framework from which to present the narratives in the study. The quality and educative nature of different events in these stories was not addressed directly, but the emotions and meanings attached to specific events illustrated their relative importance in the construction of my skydiving identity and in my learning progression. As for the principle of continuity, there was evidence that

chronological experiences built upon each other not only in terms of skill progression but also in the development of emotional stability.

The emotions and sensations I felt while experiencing these events were presented directly through the telling of stories. As the narrative inquiry unfolded and my skydiving career advanced, some emotions became less prevalent. Pre-jump anxiety and stress progressively diminished, particularly in the last two narratives which took place as I was training to become a coach. These findings are consistent with a study conducted by Watson and Pulford (2004), who reported that instructors in "high risk sports" tend to score much lower on scales of neuroticism than do amateurs. Similarly, Price and Bundesen (2005) found that experienced skydivers tend to have greater emotional stability and much less contrast between pre and post-jump emotional states than do novices.

Maslow's peak experience, as linked to skydiving by Lipscombe (1999), was evident in a number of jumps described in this project. The repetitive occurrence of peak experience throughout these narratives supports Lipscombe's claim that the phenomenon tends to happen on a regular basis, and is a major motivation for experienced skydivers to continue in the sport. At the conclusion of this study I have completed one hundred and eighty skydives and I am considered an intermediate jumper. Therefore, it seems likely but is highly speculative to assume that the peak experience phenomenon will continue to occur for me as I progress to the level of an 'experienced' skydiver.

The dramatic nature of contrasting emotions, together with a definitive (often heroic) end to the narratives in this project, illustrates compelling similarities with the

dramatic world view conceptualized by Celsi et al. (1993). Celsi et al. speculated that skydiving participation contains the essential elements inherent in classical Greek theatre – agon, denouement and catharsis – and that these elements formed the foundation of Western imagination. Indeed, each story in this project presented a buildup of tension between conflicting emotions just as seen in a typical Hollywood movie or Broadway play. It is hoped that the detailed exploration of this emotional contrast along a temporal progression will provide depth and increased relevance to the dramatic model, as well as Lipscombe's theory of repetitive peak experiences discussed above.

After each story was told, it was followed by an unpacking or inquiry into the story. The process of retelling each story was invaluable for attaching meaning to the experiences contained within these pages. During the initial story-telling phase of each narrative, I endeavored to remain as descriptive and 'in-the-moment' as possible. Frequently during the writing process, I re-experienced specific emotions just as they had occurred in conjunction with individual events. Then, as I stepped into the role of researcher and retold each story from an analytical perspective, I found myself feeling awe, gratitude, and reverence for having been fortunate enough to have lived through experiences as profound as these. Consequently, these events became infused with richness and meaning that had not existed prior to unpacking the stories. Perhaps the growth I have experienced as a result of telling these stories, both as a skydiver and as a person, is the most significant benefit of engaging in and completing this project.

Reflections on liminality and resonance

This thesis was written so that researchers and/or non-jumpers could gain insight and become more familiar with the nature of skydiving as a social and psychological experience. Indeed, explanations on skydiving terminology, equipment and procedures were built into the project so that a non-jumper could focus on the lived experience rather than remaining within the paradigm created by current stereotypes. Specifically, the project was conceived to further illuminate the skydiving world for the academic reader so that he or she may gain increased understanding of the sport from a researcher's perspective. Ultimately, it is hoped that this work may serve as a catalyst to begin breaking down the boundary of ignorance among non-participants that surrounds the sport of skydiving and skydivers as well.

As discussed earlier, the process of retelling, or unpacking, the stories was an invaluable and unforeseen benefit of conducting this research because it allowed me to reflect on my experiences on a much deeper level than I had previously. This element of liminality, or shifting identities between skydiver and researcher, is of significant importance to this project. The stories were written to impact the reader in such a way that he or she would experience, although vicariously, the emotions involved, and in so doing would draw his or her own conclusions regarding the nature of skydiving. In this way, researchers and laypersons alike may occupy a liminal space between reader and participant, just as I occupied a liminal space between skydiver and researcher as I relived and re-told the stories.

As the reader gains insight into the fear and anxiety I experienced and overcame, he or she may feel a resonance from his or her own life experience. It is

hoped that my skydiving experience may be seen as a metaphor for life; for instance, becoming aware that I packed my own malfunction could be seen as a metaphor for taking responsibility for creating circumstances in one's own life that lead to problems in the future. In any event, it is hoped that researchers and laypeople, both skydivers and non-jumpers, can benefit from these experiences by relating to their own fears and personal barriers and seeing the value in facing and overcoming them.

Directions for Future Research

The narratives in this project were written in a very personal nature with the intention of painting a vivid picture of the experience of skydiving. Clearly, the focus of this study was somewhat narrow due to the fact that the findings represented a single case. However limited in scope, the nature of this study created a paradigm in which several benefits were realized. The use of autobiographical narrative inquiry allowed for rich, detailed reporting on emotional states and changes as they occurred throughout the duration of the events covered here. It is hoped that the revealing nature of these narratives has contributed some richness to the existing body of qualitative research on skydiving.

This narrative inquiry, although somewhat extensive, spanned a finite period of time during the early part of my skydiving career. Undoubtedly, future narrative inquiries would be useful in continuing to illustrate a broader and deeper picture of the experience of skydiving. For example, narrative inquiries on participants with a much greater level of experience could enhance our understanding of the changes in emotions that occur over the passage of hundreds or thousands of skydives. The

descriptive nature of narrative inquiry makes it an appealing methodology for the researcher and potential reader alike.

Future studies on emotional changes in other skydivers as they gain experience would prove useful in validating the transferability of my findings. As stated above, it would be useful to explore what changes in emotional states occur as skydivers progress beyond the intermediate to the advanced stage. It may be possible that, as emotional states become more stable with increases in skill, the experience of skydiving begins to take on the qualities of flow (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). It seems reasonable to assume, given past findings on flow in sports, that an advanced or elite skydiver would be more likely to experience flow than would a student, novice or intermediate jumper. Further qualitative research, both biographical and more conventional in nature, is warranted to explore this possibility.

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